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## Achieving Creative Integrity on YouTube: Reciprocities and Tensions

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A renewed interest in reciprocal exchange has appeared in the realm of digital environments and interaction. In the past, scholars (e.g., Rheingold, Barbrook, and Kollock) observed that cooperation, helping practices, and reciprocal behaviors such as exchanging software code or providing feedback on creative works were often advantageous to online groups of dispersed individuals who share certain interests. Scholars writing about digital environments continue to cite the benefits of informal exchange practices that are not monied or contractual. Instead, informal reciprocal exchange and gifting of objects, time, and attention may spring from diverse motivations that include: amassing prestige (Benkler; Pearson); filling gaps where the market is insufficient; deriving pleasure from increasing collective utility (Peterson; Pearson); sharing interests and promoting community (Hellekson); facilitating learning (Lange and Ito 274-280); and promoting human relationships (Peterson; Lange, "Videos").

These discussions often draw on selected anthropological literatures to focus on how reciprocal practices are distinct from market exchanges. For the purposes of this discussion, reciprocity is defined as behaviors or beliefs in which something is given deliberately and interpersonally to another person, in response to a prior event. For instance, on *YouTube*, participants may agree to give each other feedback on their videos, so they can improve their technique. It is a reciprocal arrangement in that each person devotes the gift of their time to viewing another person's videos and providing suggestions, such as through text comments. Such viewers are not compensated financially, but the video creator may return the favor and offer critique and constructive feedback on viewers' uploaded videos.

In many contexts, market exchange and personalized, reciprocal giving practices are blurred or mutually entangled (Carrier; Offer; Kolm). For example, employees and employers may exchange gifts at Christmas. In online sites such as *YouTube*, even work posted "for fun" may be part of a kind of informational or attention economy. On *YouTube*, professional works exist alongside beginning and advanced-amateur efforts in creating video productions (Burgess and Green). Popular participants, whether professional or not, may be invited to share ad revenues on highly viewed videos with the corporate entity of *YouTube/Google* (hereafter referred to as *YouTube*) in what is called its "partnership program."<sup>1</sup> In some cases, participants on *YouTube* may capitalize on their social networks to encourage friends and acquaintances to watch their videos and forward the link to other friends. Such a pattern has been observed in other creative communities, such as independent music (Baym). The interconnected and commingled participation between professional and so-called amateur effort can offer role models and creative inspiration as well as competition and social tension. For example, someone asking friends or acquaintances to subscribe to their videos may be perceived cynically, as someone who wishes to advance their career by taking advantage of social interaction on *YouTube*, rather than creatively earning people's subscriptions and viewership through hard work and merit. Others perceive social participation and reciprocal promises to view each other's videos as legitimate means toward accumulating greater visibility and achieving professional goals such as earning money for a preferred occupation.

The following discussion, which is based on a two-year ethnographic study of *YouTube*, takes an interactional approach to understand some of the micro-workings of *YouTube* participation. The discussion is concerned with the meanings that people ascribe to reciprocal behaviors, and how they may be contested in ways that help individuals maintain a sense of creative and social integrity. The term "creative" here refers to "imaginative" or

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“expressive” effort that includes sharing aspects of the self (Sefton-Green). The discussion is concerned with interactions and responses that occur between participants and: 1) other participants; 2) the technical structure of the online video distribution system; and 3) the corporate entity of *YouTube*. The discussion traces how people conceptualize, enact, and withhold reciprocity. It analyzes whether these choices maintain a sense of community and creative integrity, or whether they are perceived to threaten the creative integrity of individuals or *YouTube* as a whole.

Because the same behavior may be perceived in different ways the article will not predefine any particular behavior as market or nonmarket in kind. Therefore it will not speak of “labor” per se, which is often associated in the literature with certain kinds of paid work, but rather the more proto-category of “effort” which can include a participant’s time, attention, or accomplishment of tasks and interactions. Such effort may result in the exchange of a thing such as a video or a comment. In this way it is possible to investigate how the same behavior, or “effort” may be perceived in different ways. For example, the effort of creating a video may be done just for fun, or it may be done to receive compensation through ad revenue sharing.

The article will begin by reviewing philosophical discourses of reciprocity and certain disagreements among scholars about its definition and social implications. Not all scholars agree that reciprocity is a beneficial form of interaction in all of its manifestations and contexts. Reciprocity is often set in opposition to commodification by corporate entities and resulting exploitation, but this article will explore tensions between peers when they attempt to engage in reciprocal helping practices on *YouTube*. Further, the article will address and challenge the notion of “immaterial labor” (Lazzarato) as it manifests in video-mediated discourses. Presupposing a non-material centrality to online interaction threatens to efface the visible and tangible results of the effort that people put in to creating, viewing, and responding to other people and the content of their videos. Manipulating cameras, lighting, sound, and editing software are tangible practices. Further, when someone posts a video or comment, this is a visible artifact that has meaning and can be manipulated; when it is removed, its absence may be noted and felt.

Tracing how discourses of “reciprocity” and “commercialism” are inscribed on the same task helps shed light on the micro-workings of *YouTube*, and on how people negotiate interactions in order to maintain what they consider to be creativity integrity for themselves and for the site as a whole, as expressed through video and discourse. The goal is to provide a more textured account of *YouTube* practices by examining rhetorical discourses and contestations concerning particular reciprocal efforts rather than adjudicating an effort’s actual market value in a given instance. Examining the tensions that participants exhibit in dealing with reciprocal behaviors aims to increase understanding of the contested meaning of reciprocity itself and its role in facilitating online participation in creative milieu.

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- [Sub for Sub](#)
- [Interactional Biographies](#)
- [Contested Reciprocities](#)
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