

Patricia G. Lange, **Kids on YouTube: Technical Identities and Digital Literacies**, Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 272 pp., \$34.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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Nowadays, social media is inundated with videos of children and families, depicting everything from seven year olds' birthday parties to high school graduations to a toddler bouncing on an inflatable mattress. In this video-rich environment, it is hard to recall that only a decade ago posting a video online was a difficult task, accessible only to the tech-savvy. The advent of the video sharing site YouTube in 2005 was a watershed moment, making uploading and sharing video much easier and more popular. Less than a year after its launch, 65,000 new videos were being uploaded to YouTube every day (Reuters, 2006).



Patricia G. Lange's illuminating two-year ethnographic study **Kids on YouTube** portrays those early days of online video, from 2006–2008, about six months after YouTube opened to the public. At that time, creating and uploading videos was still relatively rare, conducted mostly by those who perceived themselves as "technical." Lange's participants consist of two groups of pioneering creators of online video: "YouTubers," who upload their own video to YouTube regularly and see the site as their main center of gravity, and "first-generation video bloggers," who began uploading videos to their own websites even before YouTube was launched.

Going against oft-heard conceptions of video production as being self-centered, myopic, or narcissistic (e.g., Twenge & Campbell, 2009), Lange analyzes it as an opportunity for kids to gain technical, personal, and social skills. *Kids on YouTube* grew out of research funded by the MacArthur Foundation Digital Media & Learning initiative, which is also responsible for Mimi Ito et al.'s influential *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out* (2010). Lange's current book elaborates on that research and follows a similar premise: that many of the "geeky" activities that mainstream media and concerned parents often portray as a waste of time are actually immensely valuable learning opportunities for kids.

Lange focuses on kids but goes beyond them: The book describes experiences of kids creating video on their own, kids creating with their parents, and also parents' sharing of videos about their kids. Throughout, Lange's focus is on digital literacies. She addresses the question "Are kids actually learning anything by making so many videos?" (p. 8).

Specifically, Lange examines personally expressive media, which enables creators to communicate aspects of the self, with a focus on performance of technical affiliation. Technical affiliation is a key concept for Lange: One of her main arguments is that homogenous claims about "digital kids" need to be nuanced, to account for the huge variation between different kids' digital skills and their varying

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media dispositions (e.g., their preference for creating certain kinds of media). Beyond the usual suspects of socioeconomic status or gender, she sees technical affiliation (i.e., to what extent a kid identifies as “technical”) as a key variable accounting for differences in digital skill levels. The focus on technical affiliation is unique to Lange’s perspective and often illuminates aspects that are surprising or frequently left unquestioned. The resulting book offers a deeply illustrative picture of the complex world of video production and sharing, as experienced by mostly technically identifying kids who were active in YouTube’s early days.

The book’s six chapters spotlight specific themes around kids’ learning through video production. Every chapter, in addition to offering thick description of research participants’ experiences and meaning-making, also contains compelling reviews of the literature in its own subdomain. I’ll hone in on three chapters, in which the focus on technical affiliation seemed to generate the most interesting and innovative insights.

Chapter 3 puts girls “geeking out on YouTube” on center stage. In contrast to previous studies, the majority of girls Lange talked to identified as technical, though they differed in their self-perception of their own skills. One of the interesting themes in this chapter is girls’ reaction to critical comments they receive on their YouTube videos. Scholars have raised concern about the harmful impact of sexualizing comments on girls’ YouTube videos (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2011). Yet as Lange points out, “the impact and meaning of comments are often analyzed in media studies without regard to girls’ own interpretation of them” (p. 83). In her ethnographic research, Lange found that many girls—as part of their affiliation with a technical identity—espoused values of free speech online, and accepted the presence of “haters” and critical comments on YouTube as part of such an ideology. In this view, learning to constructively deal with critical comments is seen as an important digital literacy.

Chapter 6 deals with representational ideologies—the ways that kids and adults negotiate the representation of others through video. This chapter, of particular relevance given the current media moment, engages the question “When we’re filming others—including our kids—what agency are they given?” Much of this chapter revolves around a particular instance in which a prominent vlogger shared video footage of his reluctant teenage daughters, ostensibly against their will. This instance sparked a heated debate in the online video community, illuminating pressing questions such as how to strike a balance between respecting the will of a child (who often does not want to be filmed, for various idiosyncratic reasons) and also ensuring that children have mediated documentation of their childhood memories, as a form of proof of a parent’s love.

This chapter is also the one where Lange allows herself to be most critical toward her participants. In contrast to most of the book, where Lange’s anthropological approach mostly maintains a neutral interpretation, the author’s self-reported intent in this chapter is to “conscientise” and to make visible “certain representational ideologies and their moral underpinnings” (p. 158).

Chapter 7 discusses the notion—so culturally resonant in “geeky” spheres—of “being self-taught.” This chapter, which asks questions about epistemology, may be of particular interest to people from the learning sciences. Many of Lange’s tech-savvy participants identified as self-taught, vehemently claiming

that no one taught them how to do certain tasks—they just picked them up on their own. Lange carefully but critically interrogates some of these claims by contrasting them with additional information given by participants—for example, respondents who quickly identified as self-taught came, over the course of the interview, to acknowledge the role of parents, peers, or even teachers. Moreover, Lange makes a useful distinction between being self-taught and learning through “socially encoded forms of knowledge” (p. 191), for example, through manuals and tutorials. Her participants often equated being self-taught with any form of informal learning. Lange’s chapter cleverly depicts “being self-taught” as a cultural ideal, one highly valued by geeks and by those who identify as technical. Lange’s YouTubers quickly pick up that they *should* be self-taught, and they swiftly devalue forms of learning that detract from that narrative. But this ideal is also a risky one—this kind of learning does not suit everyone, or all kinds of learning, and may devalue the contribution of others.

As seen in these three chapters and others, Lange’s focus on technical identity is a unique one, and it highlights themes that rarely receive attention. The notion of being self-taught as a cultural ideal, or girls’ tolerance of critical comments as part of a technical ideology supporting free speech online, are examples of some of the evocative ideas springing from this focus.

As previously mentioned, the research for this book was conducted in 2006–2008, but *Kids on YouTube* was published in 2014, at an age of much more ubiquitous video-sharing online. The book could have benefited from a concluding discussion of some lessons this early era of online video may teach us about the present moment. This could have been especially useful in regards to representational ideologies, so relevant to our video-abundant moment.

Moreover, while there is much to learn from the focus on the geeks, *Kids on YouTube* may leave the reader wondering what those technically-identifying kids can teach us about “the rest of us.” For instance, to consider the flipside, what may be some of the perils (or advantages?) of identifying as *nontechnical*?

This book is of interest and use to a variety of disciplines, from sociology to education to communication and film. Its focus on technical affiliations makes it an interesting read to those coming from areas like computer programming or Web design, as well. In the college classroom, *Kids on YouTube* could be taught alongside Burgess and Green’s (2009) *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* as key texts on the topic of video production in a participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2006).

Potentially, *Kids on YouTube* is highly relevant to educators and parents, or even to young video producers themselves. However, the writing style and the abundant terminology (while always meticulously defined and clarified) make the book less accessible to this broader audience.

Wearing my other hat as a parent, I was often asking myself what lessons I am learning in regard to my own children. Some surprising lessons included considering giving kids a camera as a gift—this was often the first step in a trajectory of video making, and—in contrast to oft-given parenting advice—allowing kids unsupervised, unlimited time to tinker around with video.

Despite growing up with new media, not all kids' media dispositions will tend toward personal expression through video production. But Lange persuaded this academic slash parent: Kids who do can gain valuable digital—and social—skills.

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