



**Jonathan Bean,**  
Bucknell University



**Daniela Rosner,**  
University of Washington

# Making: Movement or Brand?

**A**t the most recent Consumer Culture Theory conference in June 2013, a session on making was packed with marketing professors—many anthropologists or sociologists by training—and their Ph.D. students. Most of the presentations followed the typical format of papers and PowerPoint, but the last one felt more like a show-and-tell, complete with an air of childlike wonder. Seasoned Ph.D.s gasped in amazement at a 3D-printed whistle that was passed around the room; they asked questions about the accuracy of 3D scanning using an iPhone; and they wondered what kind of materials future 3D printers might be able to print. The 3D printer, for these cultural theorists, verged on magical.

Why are we so enthralled with making? Stepping back, the maker “revolution” can usually be stripped down to a three-part explanation that goes something like this:

- 3D printers are surprisingly affordable.
- Making is good for you! Therefore, everyone should become a maker.
- The things makers make are cool.

The cool factor is not to be overlooked. Cool makers—the ones with books, blogs, and cred—are popular makers. Show-and-tell is a critical element of making and of making cool. After all, if you don’t tell someone you made that cool something yourself, in the process imbuing it with your own cool, they are likely to think a not-so-cool you ordered it from Amazon or Etsy.

Making is a cool subject of study in academia as well. Alongside SIGCHI’s new Making Cultures Spotlight [1], sociologists have

published special issues on hacking practices in the *Journal of Peer Production*. Anthropologists have interrogated hacking activities and DIY-bio practices at science and technologies studies conferences such as Science, Technology, and Human Values. And business school professors have investigated entrepreneurship and collaborative work in community-operated workspaces for electronics tinkering such as TechShops and hackerspaces.

All this interest in making, however, disguises significant distinctions. *Making* is a cover term for radically different material practices. One trajectory results in 3D-printable accessories mimicking the minimalistic design of Apple products, while another trajectory begets sites like Instructables and communities of Lifehackers. One maker may download a file for printing an Apple TV wall holder, while another maker solders a wire loom to a circuit board, and another puts tomatoes in mason jars. Do these practices really belong to the same category? Or is the frenzy over making leading us to overlook some important questions?

As the making juggernaut grows, we might benefit from distinguishing between making as movement and making as brand. Brands are, of course, quite different from movements. New social movements theory elaborates how, in an emergent social movement, boundaries form around an in-group and an out-group, with a clear focus on a desired change [2]. Branding, on the other hand, traces one trajectory back to the marking of livestock with heated plates of iron; its aim is not social change but rather the commodification and attachment of meaning. Both social movements and branding can attract publics, but while a movement is

typically understood to be a bottom-up phenomenon, brands usually originate from the top down.

Considered as a social movement, what are the boundaries the making movement uses to differentiate itself? And what is it aiming to change? In his book *Makers: The New Industrial Revolution*, Chris Anderson, the founder of *Wired* magazine, touts the democratizing power of making: “Today we are spoiled by the easy pickings of the Web. Any kid with an idea and a laptop can create the seeds of a world-changing company” [3]. His claim is a familiar one: digital utopianism with a solidly technological determinist bent. As concrete as the work of making may seem, those describing the maker movement tend to focus not on the material consequences of a 3D-printed plastic whistle, but rather on the broader social changes their practice promises to bring about. The change is described by Anderson and others as nothing short of a revolution.

Sorting out the in-groups and the out-groups in this new social movement requires a bit more investigation. Anderson’s claim that making will “create the seeds of a world-changing company” gives two hints. First, this revolution is not the sort of class struggle that will overturn the system of capitalism, but rather one that will extend the transformations of capitalism. Second, while making is portrayed as the province of “any kid with a laptop,” the emergent demography of makers suggests this is not the case. In our interviews with makers, leaders including Dale Dougherty of *Make* magazine and Maker Faire admit to attracting many, if not mostly, people like themselves—males, with plenty of disposable



Scene from World Maker Faire at New York Hall of Science in Queens, New York, September 22, 2013.

income, not just laptops. Because making is embedded in the world of engineering, a field dominated by men, it shouldn't come as a surprise that Dougherty and others have construed making as a process by dudes, for dudes.

Tellingly, to ameliorate this gender gap, rather than looking for ways to broaden the base of makers to include women, Dougherty began *Make's* "sister" publication, *Craft*, which focused on practices traditionally taken up by women (knitting, cross stitching). Yet, when the budget tightened, *Craft* was the first to be dropped, going out of print only a couple of years after it began. Dougherty says he purposefully chose the term *make* as opposed to *hack*, because it seemed less masculine and geeky and could have broader appeal [4], he thought, yet his publications still reproduced gendered divisions of labor.

But if we aim to understand making as a brand, the gendered appeal makes perfect sense. It is the result of a calculated process of market segmentation. Considered as a brand, making has considerable economic power, because being a maker means being a buyer of tools. After all, you can't solder without an iron. So while it is theoretically possible that DIY may lead to creative empowerment, the certain result is economic expansion: a new, broad

market for routers, drills, and jigs, not to mention magazines and 3D printers. Not surprisingly, this consumerism embraces the minimalist aesthetic of the designer; the achievement of simplicity and precision in the absence of skill requires more and better tools.

Other apparent contradictions are also resolved. For example, in the branding discourse, words like *ethos* and *mindset* often appear near the term *maker*. They emphasize the connection between design and thinking, handwork and culture. Modernist aesthetics—and their implicit message of better living for all—give the maker a degree of creative license. Makers see themselves not as consumers, but as producers. They are learning the technical and conceptual competencies required to contribute to the surrounding world.

While its leaders refer to making as a movement, we think it may be better understood as a brand. And judging from the quality of the emotional reaction to the 3D-printed objects passed around the conference room early last summer, making has become quite a good brand. It's the kind of brand that ends up on the cover of magazines, that sells books, and that provides a pool of meaning to consumers, who, in this

case, prefer to call themselves makers. But it's also a brand that is mobilizing a broader ideological shift, positing that individual consumer/makers (can we call them consummakers?) have the power to perfect the world through production. Whether it's a revolution or more of the same remains to be seen.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computer Spotlight; <http://bit.ly/16EU2Zn>
2. McCarthy, J.D., and Mayer N.Z. Resource mobilization and social movements: A partial theory. *American Journal of Sociology* (1977), 1212–1241.
3. Anderson, C. *Makers: The New Industrial Revolution*. Random House, 2012.
4. Dougherty, D. Interview with Daniela Rosner. Sept. 4, 2013.

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📍 **Jonathan Bean** is an assistant professor of markets, innovation, and design at Bucknell University. His research deals with domestic consumption, technology, and taste.  
→ [j.bean@bucknell.edu](mailto:j.bean@bucknell.edu)

📍 **Daniela Rosner** is an assistant professor of human-centered design and engineering at the University of Washington, where she co-directs the Tactile and Tactical Design Lab (TAT Lab). Her research focuses on how cultural histories are woven into our interactions with things we create.  
→ [dkrosner@uw.edu](mailto:dkrosner@uw.edu)