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# What Happened to *Craft*? Surfacing Alternate Histories of Digital Fabrication and Community in the Maker Movement

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**Abstract**

This project examines the co-option and erasure of the American Indie Craft movement of the early 2000s within the contemporary “maker movement,” a commercialized enterprise associated with the rising popularity of digital fabrication and broader IT cultures of electronic tinkering comprised of mostly white, college-educated men. By tracing the rise and fall of O’Reilly Media’s *Craft*: magazine, a “sister” publication of *Make*: magazine, we examine alternate histories of digital fabrication and community within dominant narratives of “making” and the IT industries that sustain them.

**Author Keywords**

Handcraft, *Craft*: magazine, women’s work, feminism, digital fabrication.

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

## Project Summary

When I (Rosner) sat down to watch the San Francisco premier of *'Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft and Design'*, the Indie Craft movement had just picked up steam in the Bay Area, it was the summer of 2009 and people from Oakland to the Mission district, mostly white and mostly women, gathered at an industrial space in San Francisco's Fort Mason district to embrace a so-called 'renaissance' in craft. On either side of the aisle lay a smattering of handmade goods. Laser cut earrings, crocheted robots and hand kit iPhone cozies, crafts that pushed beyond established categories, all at luxurious prices<sup>i</sup>.

But the celebration wasn't all fun and games. Following the film, a panel of experts discussed the dissolution of O'Reilly's *Craft:* magazine, the poster child of the movement's print media. A representative from the magazine explained that the decision came down to two observations. First, in creating *Craft:* they had split a single movement into different factions that only perpetuated gendered discrepancies. And second, she explained, *Craft:* wouldn't actually disappear. The company decided to shut down the print run to focus more on its online content, a decision they hoped would further ignite the resurgence of craft practice.

The audience didn't buy it. Why call for dissolving and reigniting in the same breath? How could a male-oriented tradition win over a broadly women-oriented tradition, again? After all, wasn't overturning the invisibility of women's work part of what the Indie Craft movement was all about?

It turns out no. The American Indie Craft movement of the mid-2000s had a more complicated and familiar

history. Coalescing in 2003, during a downturn in the American economy, the movement celebrated the digital proclivities of women busy with their hands. Many knitters became early adaptors of social media platforms and blogs, sharing stories of their projects and exchanging resources specific to their interests<sup>ii</sup>. Despite this initial groundswell of interest, however, the growth of the movement came to a halt soon after the rise of *Make* magazine.

This project examines how the American Indie Craft movement fell prey to the commercial interests of O'Reilly Media and other IT industries. The take down of *Craft:* magazine follows the trajectory of many feminist ideas. One only has to think of Wonder Woman to understand this cooption of feminist images by larger institutional forces [2]. Similarly the O'Reilly-branded "maker movement" helped turn a once feminist symbol— a reclaiming of craft as inventive labor and the development of intimate community — into an adherent of status quo technology development.

Many elements of the Make brand recall aspects of its craft-oriented precursors. Its appeal to online circulations of handmade resources reflects the operations of early craft blogs and digital platforms like Etsy.com and Ravelry.com. Similarly the format of O'Reilly's Maker Faire closely resembles that of the Renegade Craft Fair and Bizarre Bazaar, which began years earlier.<sup>iii</sup> However, leaders of the movement like Dale Dougherty, founder of *Make:*, Maker Faire and Maker Media, overlook these immediate influences of American Indie Craft and their broader histories of women's labor. Discussing the origins of the movement, Dougherty cites Steven Levy's book *Hackers* describing young male MIT students belonging

to a model rail road club, seeking to hack the trains to run them more effectively (Rosner 2014): “it’s really in this hobbyist fun space as I think makers are today.”

The decision to dissolve *Craft*: ultimately came down to the economic interests of a company helping to usurp the ideology and practices of early 2000 American Indie Craft and apply them toward IT entrepreneurship. “I couldn’t garner the support internally for spending more money to grow it,” Dougherty recalled [4]. “I really would like to have more women engaged as makers.” But, optimistically he believed that, “if you can get them to come and look at crafting and craft fares at Maker Fair then they’ll explore other things as well, and be interested naturally in things.”<sup>iv</sup> Here “things” do not just imply capitalist modes of production oriented toward high technology. By seeking to turn women crafters into makers, Maker Faire organizers also reaffirm gendered demarcations and further separate practices of digital fabrication and making from practices of craft. In this differentiation — and in the erasing of craft legacies of making — we find a rethinking of the making “revolution” [1]. Perhaps like in the case of *Craft*: magazine, it was not only institutional forces of O’Reilly Media coopting the American Indie Craft movement, but also the broader IT cultures it sought to catalyze.

### Acknowledgements

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<sup>i</sup> As Carla Sinclair, *Craft*: editor-in-chief, wrote of the new craft movement in the first issue of her magazine: “This DIY renaissance embraces crafts while pushing them beyond its traditional boundaries, either through technology, irony, irreverence, and creative recycling, or by using innovating materials and processes.” ([6] p.7)

<sup>ii</sup> In 2007, the successful social media platform Ravelry.com launched as a needlecraft resource for those “looking for community,” in the words of co-founder Jessica Forbes [4].

<sup>iii</sup> In fact, Carla Sinclair has credited the craft enthusiasm displayed during the first Maker Faire as inspiration for the development of *Craft*: magazine ([6] p.7).

<sup>iv</sup> Like the LilyPad Arduino, a sew-able version of the popular easy-to-program microcontroller, Dougherty and his fellow maker movement organizers sought out craft as a “gateway” into electronics.