TECHNOLOGY

Why I Am Not a Maker

When tech culture only celebrates creation, it risks ignoring those who teach, criticize, and take care of others.

By Debbie Chachra

Dave Catchpole/Flickr

JANUARY 23, 2015 SHARE AS GIFT SAVE

Every once in a while, I am asked what I "make." A hack day might require it, or a conference might ask me to describe "what I make" so it can go on my name tag.

I'm always uncomfortable with it. I'm uncomfortable with any culture that encourages you take on an entire identity, rather than to express a facet of your own

identity ("maker," rather than "someone who makes things"). But I have much deeper concerns.

An identity built around making things—of being "a maker"—pervades technology culture. There's a widespread idea that "People who make things are simply different [read: better] than those who don't."

I understand where the motivation for this comes from. Creators, rightly, take pride in creation. In her book *The Real World of Technology*, the metallurgist Ursula Franklin contrasts prescriptive technologies, where many individuals produce components of the whole (think about Adam Smith's pin factory), with holistic technologies, where the creator controls and understands the process from start to finish. As well as teaching my own engineering courses, I'm a studio instructor for a first-year engineering course, in which our students do design and fabrication, many of them for the first time. Making things is incredibly important, especially for groups that previously haven't had access. When I was asked by the Boston-based Science Club for Girls to write a letter to my teenaged self (as a proxy for young girls everywhere), that's exactly what I wrote about.

But there are more significant issues, rooted in the social history of who makes things—and who doesn't.

Walk through a museum. Look around a city. Almost all the artifacts that we value as a society were made by or at the order of men. But behind every one is an invisible infrastructure of labor—primarily caregiving, in its various aspects—that is mostly performed by women. As a teenager, I read Ayn Rand on how any work that needed to be done day after day was meaningless, and that only creating new things was a worthwhile endeavor. My response to this was to stop making my bed every day, to the distress of my mother. (While I admit the possibility of a

misinterpretation, as I haven't read Rand's writing since I was so young that my mother oversaw my housekeeping, I have no plans to revisit it anytime soon.) The cultural primacy of *making*, especially in tech culture—that it is intrinsically superior to not-making, to repair, analysis, and especially caregiving—is informed by the gendered history of who made things, and in particular, who made things that were shared with the world, not merely for hearth and home.

> Almost all the artifacts that we value as a society were made by the order of men.

Making is not a rebel movement, scrappy individuals going up against the system. While the shift might be from the corporate to the individual (supported, mind, by a different set of companies selling a different set of things), it mostly re-inscribes familiar values, in slightly different form: that artifacts are important, and people are not.

It's not, of course, that there's anything wrong with making (although it's not all that clear that the world needs more *stuff*). The problem is the idea that the alternative to making is usually not doing *nothing*—it's almost always doing things for and with other people, from the barista to the Facebook community moderator to the social worker to the surgeon. Describing oneself as a maker—regardless of what one actually or mostly does—is a way of accruing to oneself the gendered, capitalist benefits of being a person who makes products.

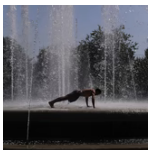
In Silicon Valley, this divide is often explicit: As Kate Losse has noted, coders get

high salary, prestige, and stock options. The people who do community management—on which the success of many tech companies is based—get none of those. It's unsurprising that coding has been folded into "making." Consider the instant gratification of seeing "hello, world" on the screen; it's nearly the easiest possible way to "make" things, and certainly one where failure has a very low cost. Code is "making" because we've figured out how to package it up into discrete units and sell it, and because it is widely perceived to be done by men.

RECOMMENDED READING

The Secret Identity of a Coyote-Like Creature

SARAH ZHANG



The Power of One Push-Up

JAMES HAMBLIN

But you can also think about coding as eliciting a specific, desired set of behaviors from computing devices. It's the Searle's "Chinese room" take on the deeper, richer, messier, less reproducible, immeasurably more difficult version of this that we do with people—change their cognition, abilities, and behaviors. We call the latter "education," and it's mostly done by underpaid, undervalued women.

When new products are made, we hear about exciting technological innovation, which are widely seen as worth paying (more) for. In contrast, policy and public discourse around caregiving—besides education, healthcare comes immediately to mind—are rarely about paying more to do better, and are instead mostly about figuring out ways to lower the cost. Consider the economics term *Baumol's cost disease*: It suggests that it is somehow pathological that the time and energy taken by a string quartet to prepare for a performance—and therefore the cost—has not fallen in the same way as goods, as if somehow people and what they do should get less valuable with time. (Though, to be fair, given the trajectory of wages in the U.S. over the last few years in real terms, that seems to be exactly what is happening.)

I am not a maker. In a value system that is about creating artifacts, specifically ones you can sell, I am a less valuable human.

I am not a maker. In a framing and value system is about creating artifacts, specifically ones you can sell, I am a less valuable human. As an educator, the work I do is superficially the same, year on year. That's because all of the actual change, the actual effects, are at the interface between me as an educator, my students, and the learning experiences I design for them. People have happily informed me that I am a maker because I use phrases like "design learning experiences," which is mistaking what I do (teaching) for what I'm actually trying to help elicit (learning). To characterize what I do as "making" is to mistake the methods—courses, workshops, editorials—for the effects. Or, worse, if you say that I "make" other people, you are diminishing their agency and role in sense-making, as if their learning is something I do *to* them.

In a recent newsletter, Dan Hon, content director for Code for America wrote, "But even when there's this shift to Makers (and with all due deference to Getting Excited and Making Things), even when 'making things' includes intangibles now like

shipped-code, there's still this stigma that feels like it attaches to those-who-don't-make. Well, bullshit. I make stuff." I understand this response, but I'm not going to ask people—including myself—to deform what they do so they can call themselves a "maker." Instead, I call bullshit on the stigma and the culture and values behind it that rewards making above everything else.

A quote often attributed to Gloria Steinem says: "We've begun to raise daughters more like sons... but few have the courage to raise our sons more like our daughters." Maker culture, with its goal to get everyone access to the traditionally male domain of making, has focused on the first. But its success means that it further devalues the traditionally female domain of caregiving, by continuing to enforce the idea that only making things is valuable. Rather, I want to see us recognize the work of the educators, those that analyze and characterize and critique, everyone who fixes things, all the other people who do valuable work with and for others—above all, the caregivers—whose work isn't about something you can put in a box and sell.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debbie Chachra

Debbie Chachra is a professor at Olin College of Engineering.

Six Months Inside One of America's Most Dangerous Industries

MICHAEL HOLTZ

SAVED MARCH 22, 2025

MOST POPULAR

1 Here Are the Attack Plans That Trump's Advisers Shared on Signal

JEFFREY GOLDBERG AND SHANE HARRIS

2 The Trump Administration Accidentally Texted Me Its War Plans

JEFFREY GOLDBERG

3 The Truth About Trump's Greenland Campaign

BRETT SIMPSON

4 Canada's Military Has a Trump Problem

PHILIPPE LAGASSÉ

5 The Double Standard at the Center of the Signal Debacle

ISAAC STANLEY-BECKER AND JONATHAN LEMIRE

6 Why Sheinbaum Can Surrender to Trump

DAVID FRUM

7 The Best American Poetry of the 21st Century (So Far)

9 *The Pitt* Has Revolutionized the Medical Drama

8

DAVID SIMS

9 Texas Never Wanted RFK Jr.'s Unproven Measles Treatment

NICHOLAS FLORKO

10 The Drink Americans Can't Quit

ELLEN CUSHING

MORE FROM TECHNOLOGY

Illustration by The Atlantic. Source: AP.

What the JFK File Dump Actually Revealed

A bunch of people's Social Security numbers

KAITLYN TIFFANY

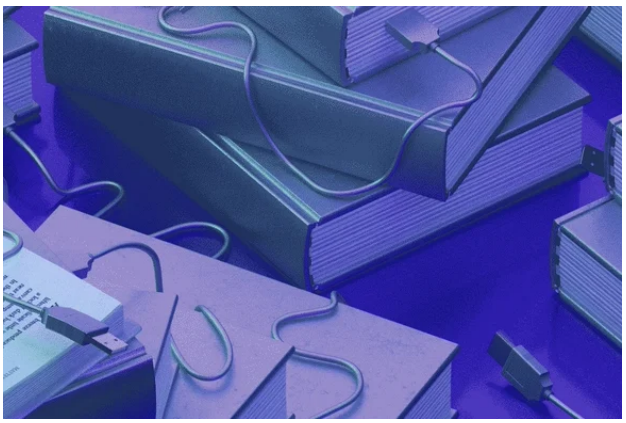


Illustration by Matteo Giuseppe Pani / The At…

The Unbelievable Scale of AI's Pirated-Books Problem

Meta pirated millions of books to train its AI. Search through them here.

ALEX REISNER

Illustration by The Atlantic

Forever 21's Brief, Hideous Life

Farewell to a beloved purveyor of trash.

KAITLYN TIFFANY

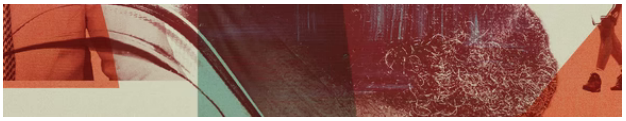


Illustration by The Atlantic*

LeBron James and the Limits of Nepotism

It's embarrassing for everyone involved.

ROSS ANDERSEN

Illustration by Colin Hunter / The Atlantic. …

Was Sam Altman Right About the Job Market?

AI labs are unleashing AI products that more than answer questions.

Illustration by The Atlantic. Sources: Getty;…

Elon Musk Looks Desperate

How to lose $148 billion in less than two months

CHARLIE WARZEL

Follow