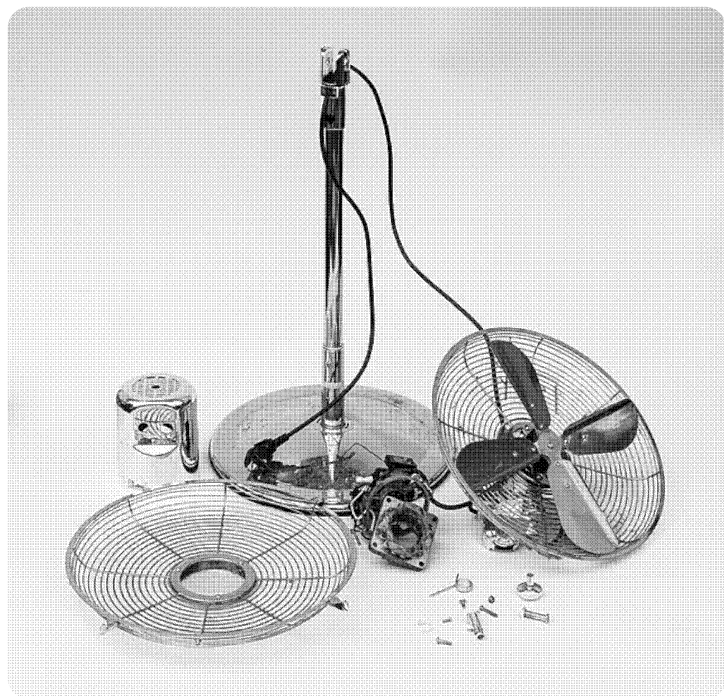


# The Impact of “Novice” Design



*With concepts of open source and technical accessibility in the design craft in mind, one must also consider the impact of what it means to actually "democratize" design, also from a socio-economic angle.*

*Crowdsourcing sites are online platforms that enable the outsourcing of tasks or projects to a diverse group of individuals. These platforms connect those seeking services or solutions with a broad community of contributors who provide skills, expertise, or creativity. Examples include 99designs<sup>(163)</sup> and DesignCrowd<sup>(164)</sup>, where design contests are launched for graphic designers to compete for prizes. Fiverr<sup>(165)</sup>, in general, offers a wide range of freelance services, known as "Gigs", starting at a base price of \$5.*

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*In her work "DIY design: How Crowdsourcing Sites Are Challenging Traditional Graphic Design Practice"<sup>(167)</sup>, Massanari explores the changing dynamics in professional fields, particularly graphic design, due to the blurring lines between amateurs and experts. She highlights the impact of Web 2.0<sup>(168)</sup> – the second generation of the World Wide Web that is focused on user-generated content, collaboration, and the sharing of information among users – on global participation and the potential relegation of expertise in favor of amateur labor. The focus is on the increasing prevalence of crowdsourcing design and competition sites, which challenge traditional notions of formal training and promote a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach.*

# Views on Crowdsourcing Design Practices

One of the arguments that champions of these kinds of crowdsourcing contests/sites have made to quash criticism from the design community is that it can help novices improve their design skills while working for real-world clients. This primarily happens in two ways: informally, whereby the community critiques and offers suggestions to other designers, or more formally through materials and resources provided by the site's owners. For example, Threadless (169) encourages K-12 art teachers to use the voting model they developed in their classrooms and provides a PDF of lesson plans and support for educators. Likewise, DesignByHumans (DBH) (170) offers a short, but comprehensive guide for would-be designers on the basics of design. Both sites also provide critique forums where individuals can get feedback regarding work in progress before it is submitted to the broader community for an official vote. DBH also includes a "resources" forum where designers can share helpful tutorials, Photoshop templates, and ask general questions about design work. That being said, the DBH forum is not well trafficked (only around 75 threads posted over three years), probably because Threadless boasts a much larger community of participants and has much better name recognition. Like DBH, Threadless also hosts forums (called blogs on their site) where extensive conversations offer design tips and individuals designs for critique. Unlike DBH, these are regularly trafficked — with around 7,000 posts in the art and design category alone, suggesting a robust community invested in art and design practice.

Yet there are a number of concerns voiced by professional designers about the crowdsourcing movement (and the blurring of the boundaries between amateur and professional design practice that it suggests). One involves the notion that DIY design ultimately undermines the value of design expertise.

**“By making our work so easy to do, we are devaluing our profession. I like democracy as much as the next person, but because of new technologies, the definition of ‘amateur’ in fields like graphic design, photography, film and music, among others, is being redefined. With everything so democratic, we can lose the elite status that gives us credibility”**

**– Stephen Heller**

For Heller, then, the role of the designer is to be an elite (not just an “expert”) voice in the culture – whose work is perceived as difficult to do.

Much of the critique of crowdsourcing sites, made by individuals within the design community, view it as spec (speculative) work. In a typical design setting, this might occur in two ways: clients requesting custom work during the RFP (request for proposal) phase of the design process; or asking outright to see some work from the designer to see if they like it before committing to the project. (*Blakeman, 2008*) If the client likes the work, the designer wins the account and gets paid. If not, the designer isn’t. Crowdsourcing sites are viewed as a type of spec work, as designers have no formal contract with the business with whom they are designing and may not get paid for their final work. Organizations like NoSpec! have taken issue with crowdsourcing suggesting that

it is unethical, often resulting in “abandoned” projects where designers do not get paid even if they win, and that the promises made to attract novice/student designers are unfulfilled (that they will gain exposure and improve based on client feedback, etc.). (*Douglas, 2010*)

Contrarians argue that the backlash to crowdsourcing work is coming only from a well-established minority who represent only the professional elite of the design community. TechCrunch commenter Sarah Lacy likens the changes occurring to those that previously challenged travel agents and independent bookstores, or...

“...any business where a service provider is charging a premium because of an inefficient market. Graphic designers should be thrilled that it took so long to get to them”

– Sarah Lacy

Lacy also points to several success stories that grew out of the 99designs community – individuals from Pakistan, the Philippines, and Indonesia who made significantly more on virtual crowdsourced projects than they could in their home regions. And again, Micah Baldwin argues that the design community is making the mistake of arguing against the ethical questionability of crowdsourcing and spec work while not addressing why it exists (calling it an “emotional” rather than “intellectual” response), which is that there are both designers willing to participate in doing it and businesses who would not be able to afford design work otherwise. The main argument in favor of crowdsourcing most often espoused is that it “lets the market decide” – meaning, if there was not a market for cheaply produced design work, then sites like these would not exist. (*Baldwin, 2009*)

In terms of intellectual property, most of the sites examined gave far more latitude towards the clients' rights than the designers' with the exception of Threadless, which allows creatives to reuse their work in other forums. Most of these sites focused much more directly on those purchasing the designs, offering little in the way of design education and development for novice designers to become experts. Again, Threadless (and DBH to a lesser degree) was the exception. Designers participating in crowdsourcing would likely make much less money than their U.S.-based equivalents especially if they had years of experience. And, the project-focused sites featured much less robust engagement and community for designers. It is unlikely that small businesses crowdsourcing a logo or Web design would have much insight into the importance and value of the work that designers do, as their interactions are tightly controlled and mediated by these sites' owners.

Creative and crowdsourcing sites (particularly the marketplace-type) are unequal playing fields with regards to intellectual property and compensation. These sites encourage clients to view design work as merely a commodity and not a very valuable one at that. With the possible exception of the more community-oriented sites like Threadless, it appears that crowdsourcing design favors the needs of those offering the platform and the clients who use it rather than the designers who are creating the actual designs. This stands in stark contradiction to the stated purpose of many of these services, which suggest they are providing opportunities for designers and merely connecting designers and clients more efficiently.

Certainly, the existence of crowdsourcing sites may encourage individuals to feel empowered that they can create logos, t-shirts, or Web sites — that they do not need to leave this kind of work to “experts.” But at the same time, many crowdsourcing sites flatten the complexities of design think-

ing from both ends. It encourages clients to view the process as a simple exchange (as the client, I tell you what I want via a form, and you as the designer create it and provide me my files) rather than a creative co-productive endeavor with the designer. These sites encourage designers to chase potential monetary rewards, and accept the “wicked problem” as defined by the client as a simple matter of providing a logo in the right color or font, with little ability to work with clients to articulate the underlying problem/need. And yet the graphic design community has done little to offer alternatives to these spaces for those individuals wishing to develop their skills outside of a traditional design program.