The Post-it Note Economy
Understanding Post-Fordist Business Innovation through One of Its Key Semiotic Technologies

by Eitan Wilf

This essay seeks to clarify an undertheorized dimension of capitalism’s transition to post-Fordist flexible accumulation—namely, the “acceleration in the pace of product innovation” (Harvey 1990:156). Based on ethnographic fieldwork in innovation workshops organized in New York City by consultants and attended by business entrepreneurs, this essay argues that whereas cutting-edge technologies such as computerized algorithms and robotic technologies dominate many post-Fordist production and distribution systems, the Post-it note—a small rectangular piece of paper with weak adhesive properties—looms large as a key semiotic technology of idea generation in many contemporary business-innovation contexts for two reasons: (1) its small dimensions afford pragmatic ambiguity and consequently the decoupling of data from the reality of the market under the guise of its reflection, and (2) its weak adhesive properties afford the synoptic arrangement of such pseudodata on conventional visual templates of what a valid insight should look like and thus the quick production of ritual insights. In doing so, the essay builds on and contributes to recent semiotic and linguistic anthropological studies that have paid close attention to the role played by graphic artifacts in organizational knowledge production.

The Surprising Ubiquity of a Highly Peculiar Immutable Mobile

David Harvey (1990) has famously characterized the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism in late twentieth-century capitalism in terms of the development of new strategies to further reduce the turnover time of capital (i.e., the time it takes for capital to complete a cycle from the capitalist’s investment of capital in the means of production to the return of capital to the capitalist after the sale of commodities; Azari-Rad 1999). Fordism, with its new technologies of production such as the assembly line, more efficient division of labor, and standardization of products, relied on innovations in means of production to reduce the turnover time of capital. However, according to Harvey, it was still plagued with rigidities that post-Fordism sought to overcome by turning to technologies of flexible accumulation whose purpose was to further reduce the turnover time of capital. These technologies include the transition to a part-time and temporary labor force, cheaper manufacturing of goods in small batches, new distribution systems such as just-in-time inventory-flow delivery systems, geographical dispersal and mobility, and the ability to take advantage of up-to-date information through computerization and electronic means of communication.

One dimension of the transition to flexible accumulation that has not received as much scholarly attention as these technologies is what Harvey has described as “an acceleration in the pace of product innovation together with the exploration of highly specialized and small-scale market niches” (Harvey 1990:156). Flexible accumulation depends not only on reduction of the turnover time of capital via more efficient production and distribution technologies but also on the faster generation of ideas for new products and services.

My purpose in this essay is to explore some of the conditions of possibility for such faster generation of ideas for new products and services. Based on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in innovation workshops organized in New York City by innovation consultants and attended by business entrepreneurs, I argue that whereas cutting-edge technologies such as computerized algorithms and robotic technologies dominate many post-Fordist production and distribution systems, the Post-it note—a small rectangular piece of paper with weak adhesive properties—looms large as a key semiotic technology of idea generation in many contemporary business-innovation contexts.1 During the specific innovation workshop on which

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1. In focusing on the idea-generation aspect of business innovation, this essay leaves out other, equally important aspects, such as market analysis, feasibility considerations, regulatory issues, and organizational politics and resources.

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this essay focuses, the workshop’s facilitators made sure that new stacks of Post-it notes, together with markers, were always available. Almost every stage of the innovation strategy incubated and practiced during the workshop involved the use of Post-it notes.

Post-it notes’ ubiquity is not limited to the specific business-innovation context I studied. Many commentators have noted Post-it notes’ surprising prevalence in otherwise increasingly computerized business-innovation settings: “In a world of supposed declining paper use, Post-it notes are getting a second life, seeing a resurgence in a new and unforeseen way—as a tool for innovation and collaboration” (Lavenda 2014). A key engine behind Post-it notes’ ubiquity in contemporary business-innovation contexts is the fact that they have been naturalized as the technology of choice for conducting brainstorming sessions (Nafus and Anderson 2009:152) and have been widely endorsed by key design and innovation consultancy firms such as IDEO, whose location in Silicon Valley and close ties with key innovative companies such as Apple and institutions such as the d.school (Stanford’s institute of design) have contributed to its widespread identification with business innovation at large (Fredman 2002:52). In a series of best-selling publications, IDEO’s founders have posited brainstorming as “a religion at IDEO, one we practice nearly every day” (Kelley and Littman 2001:55–56), and Post-it notes as their tool of choice for conducting brainstorming sessions (Kelley and Littman 2001:59).

In this essay, however, I point to other reasons for Post-it notes’ ubiquity. First, Post-it notes afford the production of pseudodata as a form of decoupling from the market under the guise of its reflection. In the process of innovation that I analyze, data about consumers are transferred to a series of textual artifacts of decreasing dimensions until they are represented in the form of single words and even single-graphic sketches on single Post-it notes. This form of representation results in decontextualization and pragmatic ambiguity (i.e., signs that point to a wide spectrum of potential objects for those who are supposed to interpret them). This decontextualization is one condition of possibility for the faster generation of ideas for new products, as context equals weight. Once one loses the context, one can move through the ideation phase more quickly.

Second, Post-it notes’ weak adhesive properties afford the arrangement of such pseudodata on conventional visual templates of what a valid insight should look like. Such templates might include, for example, a 2 × 2 matrix or a Venn diagram. When Post-it notes, which are held to be reflective of the market because of the knowledge inscribed on them, are arranged and combined with one another on such templates, the result is what I call a ritual insight (i.e., an insight that receives its validity from the conventional prestige of the visual template that underlies it). In addition, Post-it notes’ weak adhesive properties afford the real-time diagramming of the reasoning process that presumably led to the insights. This real-time diagramming is a form of ritual semiosis—that is, a ritual event that dynamically figures the concrete effects it is meant to have in the world and that is meant to have such effects precisely by virtue of such figuration (Stasch 2011; Wilf 2015a). It is meant to induce the client who paid for the innovation services to inhabit this reasoning process and thus accept its resulting insights and recommendations as natural and necessary.

I argue that the Post-it note’s affordances make it the technology of choice for many innovation consultants against the backdrop of “the tendency for design firms to skimp on analysis . . . due in part to financial pressures”—in other words, the difficulty of “[persuading] clients to fund adequate labor time for researchers to develop well-grounded interpretations” and clients’ pressure “for immediate results” (Wasson 2000:385).

At stake in this process of streamlining insights is fast analysis that corresponds to similar trends in “for-corporations research” (Urban and Koh 2013:147–149), such as fast data (e.g., data “reported instantaneously by consumers via cell phones, Internet blogs, pagers, and so forth”—[that] reflect and recreate the new managerial imperative for faster production, management, insights, and innovation that businesses now run”; de Waal Malefyt 2009:207).

In analyzing business innovation in particular and post-Fordism in general through the prism of the Post-it note, I seek to build on and contribute to recent semiotic and linguistic anthropological studies that have paid close attention to the role played by graphic artifacts in organizational knowledge production. These studies have convincingly demonstrated that whereas organization members frequently consider the documents they create and work with as representing entities in the world, such documents are actually constitutive of the world, including the people who deploy them. Rather than intermediaries that merely transport “meaning without transformation,” documents are often mediators that “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry” (Latour 2005:39; but see Appadurai 2015). Their analysis has accordingly shifted from reference and predication to “genre, material qualities, and socio-technical processes of production and circulation [such as] . . . paper quality . . . typefaces . . . mode of inscription . . . organization of graphic space . . . physical composition and compilation . . . and non-or paralinguistic signs such as brackets . . . bullet points . . . signatures . . . stamps . . . and letterheads” (Hull 2012:254).

However, most of these studies have highlighted organizational contexts in which the generative capacity of graphic artifacts (i.e., “their capacity to make things come into being”; Hull 2012:259) is the result of competition between organization members; the subversive use of documents by people from within or outside of the organization, which undermines their originally intended use; or unacknowledged and unintended consequences (Brenneis 2006; Hull 2003, 2008; Inoue 2011; Pellegram 1998; Reed 2006).2 In contrast, my focus is on

2. These emphases find expression even when the Post-it note is specifically at stake. See Hull (2003:310) in relation to the Post-it note's
an organizational context in which the generation of the new is an explicit goal. Consequently, the graphic artifacts that serve as the key semiotic technology in this context (i.e., Post-it notes) have a number of characteristics and become the center of social practices, which are highly different from the characteristics of and the social practices that emerge around the graphic artifacts prevalent in the bureaucratic contexts studied in this strand of anthropological inquiry. For example, the Post-it note is characterized by physical discardability and obsolescence rather than perdurance, and it is embraced because it affords a horizon of uncertainty and the generation of the new (cf. Hull 2003:290). In addition, the Post-it note affords and even mandates the absence of signs of individual authorship and history. It has no "event-like quality" (cf. Hull 2003:296–297). The purpose of this absence of signs of context is to enable the faster generation of ritual insights based on decontextualization, pragmatic ambiguity, and institutionalized templates. At stake is not a strategy of subversion but, rather, the conditions of possibility for innovation under post-Fordist normative ideals of "instantaneous response" to market changes (Harvey 1990:159).3

To clarify the distinguishing features of the use of Post-it notes in business-innovation processes, I engage at length with Bruno Latour’s theory of immutable mobiles (Latour 1986), which I suggest the Post-it note problematizes. Latour has argued that one of the key conditions of possibility for the scientific revolution, modern state bureaucracy, and the new capitalist economy was the gradual perfection of what he calls immutable mobiles—that is, graphic artifacts such as maps, books, diagrams, and other inscriptions in which knowledge is encoded immutably and can be mobilized without being corrupted (e.g., as opposed to a narrated myth; see Urban 2002). Immutable mobiles can be used to recruit allies based on the characteristics of and the social practices that emerge around the graphic artifacts prevalent in the bureaucratic contexts studied in these fast insights sets it apart from those few studies of documents in organizational contexts that are explicitly oriented to generating the new. These studies have tended to emphasize the collaboration between different people, which such documents make possible. For example, Murphy analyzes architectural drawings as "practical . . . tools . . . [that] afford change and reconfiguration by many observers and users" in the collaborative process of architectural design in studios (Murphy 2005:142, n. 6; see also Murphy 2015:128–171), and Nafus and Anderson take a similar stance in their analysis of project rooms (and the material artifacts used in them) in corporate ethnographic research as "boundary objects"—that is, places of "heterogeneity and instability of knowledge practices," which enable "people who have different levels of engagement and different disciplinary commitments [to] dip in and out of a research effort" (Nafus and Anderson 2009:139).

Against the backdrop of this argument, I first argue that the use of Post-it notes in the ethnographic context I studied demonstrates that graphic inscription does not guarantee immutability of knowledge, because knowledge abstracted, made simple, and represented on artifacts of small enough dimensions can become so pragmatically ambiguous that it can be considered to be graphically mutable. Second, the notion that graphic mobility affords the synoptic analysis of data and consequently organized skepticism and theory making is problematized inasmuch as the Post-it note becomes a vehicle for the production of ritual insights by means of the synoptic arrangement of pseudodata on conventional templates, which its weak adhesive properties and hence mobility afford.

The essay begins with a section on the ethnographic context and implications. I then problematize the most prevalent explanation given to Post-it notes’ ubiquity in business innovation—namely, that they form the perfect technology with which to conduct brainstorming sessions. I then proceed to analyze what I suggest are the two key factors responsible for Post-it notes’ prevalence: their affordance of (1) pragmatic ambiguity and the production of pseudodata and (2) the real-time synoptic arrangement of such pseudodata on conventional visual templates, all of which culminates in the quick production of ritual insights. I end the essay by discussing the discontent that resulted from these two factors among the workshop participants, and I tie this discontent to some of post-Fordism’s broader experiential contours.

The Ethnographic Context and Implications

As Harvey has argued, in the post-Fordist “highly uncertain, ephemeral, and competitive environment,” getting up-to-date information and making swift decisions have become crucial for survival and profit making (Harvey 1990:158; see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Gershon 2011; Ho 2009; Holmes and Marcus 2006; Zaloom 2006). The need for instantaneous responses to market changes has “spawned a wide array of highly specialized business services and consultancies capable of providing up-to-the-minute information on market trends and the kind of instant data analyses useful in corporate decision-making” (Harvey 1990:159). The recent exponential rise in the number and visibility of innovation consultants is a direct result of this need and is firmly based in the contemporary post-Fordist moment. Business innovation has become a form of a general and self-reflexive expert knowledge that is meant to be applied to a wide variety of objects across different business sectors, including to itself (Wilf 2015b:680).4

At the same time, business innovation has been a policy-driven concept developed and disseminated by different kinds

3. My emphasis on Post-it notes’ ritual function in the generation of fast insights sets it apart from those few studies of documents in organizational contexts that are explicitly oriented to generating the new. These studies have tended to emphasize the collaboration between different people, which such documents make possible. For example, Murphy analyzes architectural drawings as “practical . . . tools . . . [that] afford change and reconfiguration by many observers and users” in the collaborative process of architectural design in studios (Murphy 2005:142, n. 6; see also Murphy 2015:128–171), and Nafus and Anderson take a similar stance in their analysis of project rooms (and the material artifacts used in them) in corporate ethnographic research as “boundary objects”—that is, places of “heterogeneity and instability of knowledge practices,” which enable “people who have different levels of engagement and different disciplinary commitments [to] dip in and out of a research effort” (Nafus and Anderson 2009:139).

4. Inasmuch as the expert knowledge that is the focus of this essay is meant to transcend specific business products, services, and sectors, it is different from innovation strategies developed by businesses specializing in specific products, services, and sectors, which are meant to be applied only within these specialized business contexts (cf. Moeran and Chris-tensen 2013).
of consultants, such as psychologists, sociologists, economists, designers, and business-school professionals, throughout most of the twentieth century (Godin 2008:41; Scott 2003:38; Wilf 2015b, 2015c). It has been dominated by two strands of research: (1) the economic study of innovation, mainly via the quantification and measurement of productivity in relation to technological change and its commercialization (Christensen 1997; Godin 2008:34; Schumpeter 1939), and (2) management and organizational research involving psychological research on organizational creativity, including strategies of creative problem-solving and idea generation (Guilford 1950; Osborn 1953; Rossman 1935).

The workshop I discuss in this essay is based in the research tradition of the study of organizational creativity as a psychological problem. The facilitators base their expertise on design, business management, and advertising. They trace part of their professional lineage to Design Thinking, a system of user-centered design and innovation methods widely associated with the innovation consultancy firm IDEO (Brown and Wyatt 2010). This lineage has clear ties to the psychological study of creativity, in that Design Thinking’s key method of ideation—brainstorming, on which I will elaborate below—emerged in the context of the psychological study of creative problem-solving in the mid-twentieth century (Osborn 1953:xiv). The innovation workshop took place over 5 weeks in the summer of 2014 in a new office building in Manhattan’s Midtown. It was attended by 15 participants, mostly from the start-up sector and the creative industries. The workshop was structured around a specific problem presented by a real client, an organization that wanted to innovate its website to achieve higher retention rates among its target audience. Participants were divided into three teams, with each team working on a specific subbrief of the problem presented by the client. By trying to solve the client’s problem by means of the business-innovation strategies inculcated in the workshop, participants hoped to gain hands-on experience and what they considered to be crucial skills in the contemporary marketplace.

Inasmuch as this essay is an ethnographic study of methods associated with Design Thinking, it is directly relevant to recent calls for ethnographic experimentation with design methods as an alternative model of anthropological training: “The design studio could be a place in which students could be taught—could experience—how to anthropologize” (Rabinow et al. 2008:113), how “to let the field or the particular story or theme that is emerging take over the design. The challenge is to become part of a foreign milieu, to submit to the outside, to get drowned in and carried away by it, while staying alert to the gradual emergence of a theme to which chance encounters, fugitive events, anecdotal observations give rise” (Rabinow et al. 2008:116). In a direct response to these calls, Lucy Suchman has argued that “considered recently as a model for anthropology’s future (Rabinow et al. 2008) . . . design and innovation are [instead] best positioned as problematic objects for an anthropology of the contemporary. . . . We need less a reinvented anthropology as (or for) design than a critical anthropology of design” that would lead to insights regarding “the limits of design” (Suchman 2011:3; emphasis in the original).

Against the backdrop of the fact that the recent calls for ethnographic experimentation with design methods are motivated by the idea that design epitomizes “the primacy of inquiry and data over theory” (Rabinow et al. 2008:116), the arguments I make in this essay, which point to design as a context in which the fast generation of ritual insights can take place, seem to validate Suchman’s critique. Indeed, my analysis points to the conventional templates at the heart of design methods themselves, which are no different from the “well-established theories and/or tacit norms of what fieldwork ‘is,’ of what a published monograph should look like” (Rabinow et al. 2008:116), which the experimentation with design methods in anthropological training and practice is meant to problematize.

However, inasmuch as the calls for “designs for an anthropology of the contemporary” are calls for experimentation and “trials of concept and value” (Marcus 2012:442), I take them to be, first and foremost, a form of anthropological self-critique in which reflexivity of method is a key dimension. Clarifying the limits of design (Suchman 2011), then, can be integral to experimentation with ethnographic form informed by design. Accordingly, this essay follows the conviction that if anthropology has become (and must remain) a self-critical project, “a reinvented anthropology as (or for) design” and “a critical anthropology of design” (Suchman 2011:3) can be productively combined.

“We Just Live in That Kind of a Universe”:
Brainstorming and Creative Cognition Naturally
PIN(ned) Down

To understand the role played by Post-it notes in some business-innovation contexts, it is first necessary to problematize the most popular explanation for their ubiquity: their presumed

5. The innovation consultancy firm organizing the workshop was founded in 2012. It offers innovation corporate training as well as contract work with individual companies on specific projects. Since its foundation, it has collaborated with companies from the banking, apparel, food, education, and tourism sectors and industries on a wide range of projects.

6. My overall research on business-innovation practices began in April 2012 and has involved ethnographic fieldwork in additional sites, as well as interviews, in the United States, which I do not discuss in this essay. I have attended two innovation workshops in addition to the one featured here, and I have conducted fieldwork with the consulting firms organizing them. I have also attended a course on business innovation given at a top-tier business school. Last, I have attended three international business-innovation conferences and conducted interviews with innovation consultants from four different consulting firms.

7. Indeed, two institutional sites of anthropological research have been established in the model of the design studio following these calls, in one of which, the Center for Ethnography at the University of California, Irvine, recent experiments in ethnographic conceptualizations that are informed by Design Thinking—the same paradigm that informs my informants’ practice—have incorporated Post-it notes (Marcus 2012; Marcus and Murphy 2011, 2012).
quintessential appropriateness for conducting brainstorming sessions. I suggest that this perceived appropriateness is informed by a specific semiotic ideology (i.e., “a reflection upon, and an attempt to organize, people’s experiences of the materiality of semiotic form,” which might include “not only language but also music, visual imagery, food, architecture, gesture, and anything else that enters into actual semiotic practice”; Keane 2007:21).\(^8\)

As I have discussed elsewhere in detail (Wilf 2015:18–S19), brainstorming draws from a highly influential Romantic ethos of creativity understood in terms of mental processes (hence the “brain”) that are suffused with powerful sensations and emotions (hence the “storm”) that spontaneously result in creative output. This specific Romantic ideology of creativity has become part of the fabric of the Western modern popular imagination, a taken-for-granted script about creative agency that is widely disseminated and reproduced in different artifacts and narratives.\(^9\) Post-it notes are understood to be a natural semiotic technology with which to conduct brainstorming sessions because each Post-it note can presumably represent a mental building block—a component of the brain—and Post-it notes can be shuffled and reshuffled as in a storm to unexpectedly yield creative insights. The notion that Post-it notes (PINs) are the quintessential technology for conducting brainstorming sessions is thus motivated by a specific semiotic ideology of creative cognition naturally PIN (ned) down, as it were.\(^10\)

For example, when I asked David, an innovation consultant in his mid-thirties who was one of the workshop’s two key facilitators, why Post-it notes play such a key role in the workshop, he answered:

Well, there are two things. One, it’s like the Planck length. Like, why is the primitivity of space and the charge of electrons what it is? We just live in that kind of a universe. For some reason, a Sharpie and a Post-it note can only capture one idea. And that’s really helpful. Being able to put one idea per Post-it note allows you to turn an idea into a mobile artifact, which is the second thing—it helps with ideation: being able to collide ideas, being able to move ideas, have a spectrum of ideas, have clusters of ideas, pieces, chunks of information, breaking ideas into chunks of information—

Naturalization is present through and through in David’s comments. First, David, who has an undergraduate degree in physics in addition to a graduate degree in design, naturalizes the notion that a Post-it note can capture one mental building block by comparing a single Post-it note to an elementary particle—the charge of an electron. The alignment between a Post-it note and a single mental building block is a fact of nature, like the Planck length: “we just live in that kind of a universe.” Second, David naturalizes the notion that moving these mental building blocks in a storm-like fashion might serendipitously result in interesting insights when he compares this notion to the way in which molecules join one another to “suddenly make organisms.”\(^11\)

Similar forms of naturalization were prevalent in the workshop. For example, David and Jeffery (the workshop’s second key facilitator) frequently referred to the act of writing ideas on Post-it notes as a “brain dump.” They subsequently emphasized the need to move the Post-it notes around to arrive at unexpected results. Jeffery explained to the participants in the first week: “What we are actually doing is moving things around, finding insights, learning something new, and then moving things again. . . . Because often it’s not obvious from the beginning, and it’s only when we start moving things around that we start to see something that’s exciting and compelling” (cf. Nafus and Anderson 2009:152–153).

Both brainstorming sessions and Post-it notes as the technology of choice for conducting the sessions have thus become prevalent in business-innovation contexts, partly because under a specific semiotic ideology they align with a highly influential Romantic ideology of creative cognition. However, as I argue in the next two sections, important reasons for the Post-it note’s ubiquity in business-innovation contexts lie elsewhere.

8. See Matthew Hull’s related notion of graphic ideology—that is, “conventions for the interpretation of graphic forms, views about how artifacts are or ought to be produced and circulated, and more general conceptions regarding the ontology and authority of graphic artifacts” (Hull 2008:305).

9. For a discussion of Romantic mystifications of creativity, including in the contemporary business world, see Wilf (2014).

10. Brainstorming itself can be viewed as an offspring of a specific paradigm of creativity with a long history in the West (i.e., creativity as the product of combinatorics; Wilf 2013b). The Post-it note, by virtue of its material qualities, can appear to be quintessentially aligned with this paradigm, too.

11. See Wilf (2013a) for a discussion of the use of contingency as a cultural resource for cultivating modern normative ideals of creative intentionality. For a critique of brainstorming from within the business-innovation world, see Wilf (2015b).
bibles participate in what Latour calls a “deflating strategy” in which “things [are] turned into paper . . . [and] paper is turned into less paper” (Latour 1986:23). “Scientists start seeing something once they stop looking at nature and look exclusively and obsessively at prints and flat inscriptions.” At stake is a “drift from watching confusing three-dimensional objects, to inspecting two-dimensional images which have been made less confusing” (Latour 1986:16). This “cascade of ever simplified inscriptions” (Latour 1986:17) enables scientists to perfect their knowledge about nature because they do not have to deal directly with it but rather with its simplified representations. Immutable mobiles eventually enable the synoptic study of different data, which gives rise to organized skepticism, refutation, and theory making.

On the surface, the Post-it note seems to be a quintessential immutable mobile. It is possible to encode on Post-it notes knowledge that will remain immutable, and it is possible to mobilize and synoptically arrange them to discover meaningful patterns in the data they represent. Post-it notes also fit well with the deflating strategy highlighted by Latour. As David put it, the Post-it note’s small dimensions mean that you “can only capture one idea” per Post-it note. In the workshop, data collected about consumers were transferred to a series of textual artifacts of decreasing dimensions that culminated in Post-it notes.

However, a closer look at how Post-it notes were used in the workshop reveals that they align with neither Latour’s definition of immutable mobiles nor his description of their impact. This misalignment is at the heart of the conditions of possibility for the faster generation of ideas for new products under post-Fordist normative ideals of instantaneity.

The first qualification pertains to the very notion of graphic immutability. When data about consumers were transferred to a series of textual artifacts of decreasing dimensions that culminated in Post-it notes, the result was increased abstraction of the data until they were represented in the form of single words or even single-graphic sketches on single Post-it notes. At this point, their meaning became so ambiguous that their visual representation could be considered to be graphically mutable. For example, in the third week, each team arrived with notebooks filled with data that they had collected in the previous 2 weeks by means of interviews, online search, and experimentation with the client’s website. Jeffery instructed them to “transfer all the information over to Post-it notes . . . . Go to the actual notes that you have and look at that data, that information, to make sure you’re pulling out all the things that are interesting and compelling.” He then explained that “there are really good categories” of information that the participants should strive to capture on Post-it notes. The following exchange then took place:

**Jeffery.**  [The categories are:] (1) Who are the people that you talked to? What are their defining characteristics that are important to this conversation? (2) What were the objects, whether digital or physical, that you found? . . . (3) What were the activities that were happening? . . . (4) Frames of mind—what are the belief systems that you found during your interviews? . . . (5) What are the needs of [the people you interviewed]? . . . And then, finally, what things do you have that do not fit into these five buckets?

**Sean [a participant].** How general should the information on the Post-it notes be? Is it one word?

**Jeffery.** Fantastic, that’s a great question. So it’s going to be one cohesive idea per Post-it note. “Facebook” is a really bad Post-it note. That means nothing to nobody. We have no context. So make sure there is actually a complete thought going on so somebody can walk up to that and be like, “this makes sense as an idea.”

This vignette reveals the difference between two kinds of abstraction. The purpose of the categories listed by Jeffery is to help the participants meaningfully abstract the data they had collected. These categories are informed by a specific theory of meaningful information. In contrast, Sean’s question and Jeffery’s reply suggest that the abstraction mandated by the small dimensions of the Post-it note is not meaningfully but rather arbitrarily motivated and, moreover, that information abstracted to fit a single Post-it note might mean “nothing to nobody. We have no context.”

As Jeffery’s reply to Sean’s question reveals, the facilitators were not oblivious to the decontextualization and pragmatic ambiguity that might result from transferring previously collected information to Post-it notes. However, despite their emphasis that each Post-it note must represent one cohesive idea, they constantly pushed the participants to transform their data into one or two words or even a visual sketch, which would fit the small dimensions of a Post-it note, with the result being the same decontextualization and ambiguity about which they cautioned the participants. David and Jeffery stressed that the participants needed to learn to present data in a very succinct and catchy way, to “make ideas huggable,” as David put it (i.e., easily embraced by the client). This is a skill they described as “distillation.” David defined distillation as “taking all your ideas and boiling them down to a very succinct pitch or distinct idea . . . [akin to] a tagline.” This emphasis on distillation finds its perfect material artifactual abode in the Post-it note because the Post-it note not only affords distillation—it forces it.

The pressure to distill, in the sense of abstracting information to the bare catchy minimum, was so salient that it soon provided the backdrop for joking commentaries. Thus, when David asked my team members to narrate what they thought

12. Compare de Waal Malefyt (2009:207) for decontextualization in the case of fast data rather than their fast analysis, which is the focus of this essay.
was important in the data they had collected in the previous 2 weeks, the following exchange took place:

David. Grab some Post-it notes. If there’s something in these stories, capture it. You have to be active while listening. . . . You need to think how I can distill all of this. . . . So you need to start thinking how I can boil down all this.

Jonathan [a participant]. That’s why they call you “the distiller.” [Laughter]

David. That’s true, actually!

When the team members started to convey their impressions, David sustained his reputation as a distiller. Time and again, he stopped them in mid-sentence and distilled their impressions in the form of single words or phrases, which he wrote down on Post-it notes or instructed the participants to do. Thus, when Cory, a team member, gave a 2-minute commentary and said that “they [the target audience] go online for resources. They don’t go [online] for conversations,” David stopped him and said, “tools versus conversations. Or tools versus dialogue. Somebody fucking write that down—it’s really interesting,” whereupon Jenny, a team member, took two Post-it notes and wrote “tools” on one and “conversations and dialogue” on the other. When Jonathan said that “we talked to an administrator—she was not tech savvy. I think there is a generational issue when it comes to congregating online,” David interrupted him by saying, “great—young versus old, in-[organization] versus out-of-[organization],” whereupon members wrote each of these terms on separate Post-it notes and attached them to the glass wall. When Jonathan continued and said that “either because it’s harder [for the target audience] to structure [online conversations] as part of their day, or more because it’s actually useful, they limit [interaction] to face-to-face interactions within the [organization],” David quickly took a Post-it note and wrote “structured conversations” on it and then attached it to the glass wall. The vigor with which he did so produced laughter among the team members. Jonathan, riffing on the same theme as before, said, “He only drinks distilled water.”

Participants implemented these lessons in distillation very quickly. They came up with catchy phrases, such as “treasure trove” and “time-starved,” as well as doodles to accompany them. Indeed, at one point, Cory demonstrated his mastery of distillation when he distilled the distiller himself, no less! During a short coffee break that involved donuts, David declared that he was going to wash his hands before touching the food, whereupon Cory quickly grabbed a Post-it note, drew something on it, and posted it on David’s back, to everyone’s laughter. The Post-it note was inscribed with the word “germaphobe [sic]” and a doodle of a germ (fig. 1).

I suggest that participants were effectively being trained in producing the same kind of powerful rhetorical devices described by Urciuoli (2000) in her analysis of the language of liberal arts college-recruiting literature—namely, shifters (Silverstein 1976) such as “skills, leadership, and multiculturalism” that are “semantically vacuous” and “denotatively empty” and whose rhetorical force emanates from their ability to index “different discursive fields” (Brenneis 2006[44]). Post-it notes, due to their small dimensions, force the production of such denotatively empty rhetorical devices. In the context of the innovation workshop, the phrases encoded on Post-it notes reflexively indexed the discursive field of business innovation itself and its normative ideals. More specifically, these phrases reflexively indexed distillation and the ideals of speed and fast insights that underlie it (Urciuoli and LaDousa 2013). Distillation as a self-reflexive marker of an occupational group and its normative ideals became a key focus in the workshop in addition to (and often at the expense of) referential content about the market.

To be sure, in the early stages of the data’s abstraction, David and Jeffery instructed the participants to anchor Post-it notes in some context by, for example, posting each Post-it note on the wall next to its related person board. A person board is a template distributed by the facilitators on which participants could represent the information, which they had previously collected through interviews with the client’s target audience, according to the following categories: name of interviewee, location of interview, date of interview, sketch of interviewee, key story from interview, key quotes from interview, and general notes (fig. 2). On the surface, a person board, with its assortment of rectangles for each category, can be thought of as an assortment of Post-it notes. However, because all the rectangles on a person board refer to the same person and cannot
be separated from one another, the person board represents a deeper context. It has a quasi-“event-like quality” (Hull 2003: 296–297) and is absent of the same level of decontextualization and pragmatic ambiguity of which the single Post-it note is productive, as Jeffery explained:

Jeffery. Those [the person boards] are going to go up on the wall as well. Those are going to be great reference points. When you’re looking at the Post-it note, you’re going to be like, “who is this person? Who is this human?” And that [the person board] will help you. Those will be off to the side. . . . So important things to think about: both lower corners of the Post-it notes are great places to put information. And when you’re looking and connecting these back to the person boards, if you put someone’s [i.e., an interviewee’s] initials in the lower right-hand corner [of the Post-it note] you always know who that person is or who that quote is attached to. So think about how you can label your Post-it notes so they have information on them that’s going to be supportive, so if you see an entire cluster and you’re like, “wow, everybody thinks this way!” [you’d then realize,] “oh, no, this is all one guy.” That’s good for us to know. We don’t want to have these beliefs that are fundamentally wrong.13

This awareness of the risk of pragmatic ambiguity notwithstanding, Post-it notes were soon decoupled from their relevant person boards in the same way that the emphasis on having one cohesive idea per Post-it note did not prevent the subsequent representation of data on single Post-it notes in the form of highly abstract single words and sketches. In the first half of the session, Post-it notes were inscribed with more

13. At the same time, one should not overestimate the depth of context afforded by a person board. Inasmuch as a person board consists of small rectangles, it allows the recording of scant information whose value resides less in its faithful representation of a concrete individual and more in its evocation of an ideal-typical consumer via the synthesis of fairly abstract bits of information. Compare this with Moore’s description of the establishment of “brand personality” in a branding consulting firm in terms of “a number of specific human characteristics [such as] age, sex, appearance, hobbies, tastes, and emblematic possessions,” expressed in the form of “abstract nouns” that are then visually represented via “mood boards” (i.e., “collages of images drawn from image banks and existing advertisements, and tacked onto foam boards”; Moore 2003:342–343).
detailed information, contained the initials of the names of the interviewees, and were placed in physical proximity to their relevant person boards (fig. 3). Even when a Post-it note was inscribed with a very basic single word and drawing, it was usually posted near another Post-it note that contained some contextual information about it, however minimal (fig. 4). By the second half of the session, however, most remaining Post-it notes were inscribed with a single or very few words and catchphrases, sometimes accompanied by equally basic diagrams or doodles, while the context-giving Post-it notes and person boards disappeared (fig. 5). These textual transformations enabled the participants to produce what I call pseudo-data—that is, data that appear to emerge from and reflect the market but are so ambiguous and decontextualized that they are decoupled from it.

Knowledge inscribed on Post-it notes might be graphically immutable, but it often becomes so ambiguous that for all intents and purposes, it can be considered to be graphically mutable. The decontextualization and ambiguity vis-à-vis the market under the guise of its reflection, which the Post-it note affords and even mandates, is one condition of possibility for the faster generation of insights in a post-Fordist context that is so heavily informed by “the values and virtues of instantaneousness” (Harvey 1990:286), as context equals weight.14 This ambiguity is different from the one presumed to be the default reality of social life, against the backdrop of which order becomes a real-time achievement in different business meetings and communicative events (Garfinkel 1967; Schwartzman 1989:13–45). By means of textual transformations that culminate in Post-it notes, ambiguity becomes the real-time achievement rather than the starting point of the innovation process. As I will argue in the conclusion, at the same time that this ambiguity functions as a resource in the faster generation of in-

Figure 3. Post-it notes in proximity to their relevant person boards (person boards are at the top). A color version of this figure is available online.

14. Note that Latour acknowledges the risk of pragmatic ambiguity when he points out that “there are always many interpretations possible” to any simplified visual representation. However, by replying that this risk is the reason for which “so much energy and time is devoted by scientists to corner [a dissenter who offers a different interpretation] and surround him with ever more dramatic visual effects . . . [such as] a new collection . . . new labelling . . . new redrawing” (Latour 1986:18), he begs the question of the simplicity presumably afforded by the graphic representation of nature, as his reply simply shifts the complexity from nature to the collections of its graphic representations.
sights, it often also results in confusion that afflicts those who deploy it.

“Showing the Movement Is Important”: The Post-it Note between Mobility and Immobility

The use of Post-it notes in the workshop also qualifies Latour’s argument about the function of immutable mobiles’ mobility, not only immutability, in knowledge production. To reiterate his argument, the significance of graphic artifacts such as maps, books, and diagrams is not only that they allow knowledge to be encoded immutably but also that they allow knowledge to become mobile. This is important because knowledge that can be mobilized can also be collected and thus synoptically studied. This becomes a condition of possibility for organized skepticism, refutation, theory making, and recruiting allies (Latour 1986:11, 15).

Against this backdrop, note, to begin, that Post-it notes are quintessentially amenable to synoptic display not because they are mobile but because they combine mobility and immobility in their very materiality, due to their weak adhesive properties that make it possible to arrange them in different configurations on vertical flat surfaces. More significant, however, is the fact that their enhanced synoptic presentability affords their arrangement on conventional visual templates of what a valid insight should look like. Because Post-it notes appear to be reflective of the market by virtue of the knowledge inscribed on them, the result of their arrangement on such conventionally prestigious templates is the quick production of ritual insights.

For example, the workshop’s third week was dedicated to learning ways to understand the data collected in the previous 2 weeks and to develop insights that could lead to innovative solutions to the client’s problem (cf. Wasson 2000:383). The facilitators gave the participants a handout that included a number of ready-made frameworks such as the following (fig. 6).

Jeffery projected a slide that showed the ready-made frameworks and explained:

So the “understand” phase is about connecting the dots. What we are trying to do is to figure out, based on all of our conversations that we had [with the target audience] and the observations that we made, what are the interesting links that we saw. . . . We will use these frameworks and abstractions to start to pull out what these things are that we’re hearing on a larger scale and what they actually mean. . . . Often in this phase, I find people wanting to collect tons of information. They want to complicate this. It’s not necessary. When we’re going through this, using basic frameworks is going to give you amazing insights, and we don’t need something crazy with 17 different lines and eight different compartments and a back door—it’s not necessary. . . . And so this is what we are looking for: what is there that is something new? An insight is when you get something and you’re like, ”you know what? I never would have guessed this. From the preconceived ideas, the assumptions that I’ve had, this is telling me a different story, and this is a story that I’m excited to tell back to the client.” And an insight can look like a lot of things. Sometimes an insight is just a great framework where people just
look and they are like, "wow, that means something to me. I can connect with that. That’s unexpected. That’s interesting."

Note the tension that structures Jeffery’s explanation. On the one hand, he keeps emphasizing that the point of understanding is to analyze the data so as to come up with new assumptions that will problematize preconceived ones. On the other hand, he recommends the use of ready-made frameworks as insights in and of themselves. When Jeffery warns the participants not to collect “tons of information” but to instead use “basic frameworks” that are “going to give you amazing insights,” he inadvertently points at the ways in which such frameworks have become conventional visual templates of what a valid insight should look like. The unexpected or new has thus been standardized and streamlined by means of the reification of the visual forms that valid insights are expected to have (cf. Brenneis 2006; Riles 1998; Strathern 2006).  

15. Note that these frameworks, in addition to brainstorming sessions and the use of Post-it notes to conduct them, owe part of their popularity to IDEO’s institutionalized prestige, as IDEO has disseminated the same visual frameworks in its different publications (cf. IDEO:101).

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Figure 5. Growing levels of decontextualization (note the absence of person boards and of the Post-it note that contextualized the “coach” Post-it note, now placed on the left side of the whiteboard). A color version of this figure is available online.

Figure 6. Ready-made frameworks for data analysis. A color version of this figure is available online.
Awareness of the arbitrary nature of these frameworks found expression when Cory asked the facilitators, “Why do we have to start from these frameworks? Perhaps something else would work better.” Jeffery replied:

I think that’s a great starting point. That’s why I presented those out. They can be a first set of clusters: what are we seeing and learning based on these start headers? And those will probably change. You will have those initially and be like, “alright, what are some interesting patterns that we can learn from?” What we are actually doing is moving things around, finding insights, learning something new, and then moving things again. And it’s that constant evolution of the data that helps us to get to some interesting places.

Jeffery suggests that the specific frameworks he presented to the participants are a good starting point and that through subsequent “evolution of the data,” other frameworks and patterns might ensue. However, no such evolution took place in subsequent stages. The three teams were given 1 hour to synthesize the data they had collected in the previous weeks and transfer them to Post-it notes. They were asked to come up with meaningful insights about the data represented on the Post-it notes. The insights were supposed to be drawn on whiteboards and large rectangular pieces of paper. Immediately at the beginning of the discussion among my team members, one of them, Jeannine, approached the whiteboard and drew a 2 × 2 matrix with a marker. She then said, "OK, can we arrange them [i.e., the Post-it notes] on this framework?" After a minute, she added, "What if we do these two axes?" She then wrote four different values near the four end points of the matrix’s two axes, and we then experimented with different arrangements of the Post-it notes on the matrix (fig. 7). When I looked around me at this point, I could see that all the other teams used a 2 × 2 matrix on which they experimented with their Post-it notes. Of the ready-made frameworks Jeffery had shown us 20 minutes earlier, my team also experimented with precisely the same concentric circles framework (fig. 8), and another team also experimented with precisely the same Venn diagram framework (fig. 9). Significantly, these frameworks formed the basis for the final presentations to the client 2 weeks later.

Jeannine drew the 2 × 2 matrix prior to any discussion about whether it aligns with a meaningful structure perceived in the data. She drew the matrix as a way of giving the data

Figure 7. Experimenting with Post-it notes on a 2 × 2 matrix ready-made framework. A color version of this figure is available online.
a structure that would appear to be meaningful, a task made easy because Post-it notes, which appear to be reflective of the market by virtue of the knowledge inscribed on them, can be easily synoptically arranged on these frameworks. I emphasize the idea of giving the data a structure that would appear to be meaningful not only because, as Jeffery’s words suggest, one of these frameworks’ key functions is to help participants to generate insights as fast as possible with little information, but also because the facilitators time and again highlighted these frameworks’ rhetorical function vis-à-vis the client. Thus, in an interview, David made the following comments:

They are a crutch, but at the same time I think—the 2 × 2 matrix is just so good! Having those things in your back pocket, it’s like a language—they are mental models. So it’s a grammar of ideas . . . [of] statements about reality. [Also, they are about] how you frame the debate. You made the playing field! This is my favorite stuff, by the way. You made the playing field, like, personal, individual, local [i.e., different axes], and they [the client] go, "ah, do we want to be here or here [on the matrix]?" They are not actually questioning the framework, because you got it right or because you got it right enough. You explained it in a way that made sense, and then what you allowed them to do is to have a dialog where they can actually physicalize where they want their company strategy to be. That’s really amazing!

Note the importance David attaches to these frameworks’ rhetorical impact on the client (cf. Vangkilde 2013:87–88). He argues that the frameworks can define the playing field, priming the client’s basic assumptions with such a persuasive power that the client’s representatives “are not actually questioning the framework” but accept it as a given. Although David suggests that the client might accept the framework because it is an accurate enough statement about reality, his overall approach to these frameworks suggests that their force might also emanate from the fact that they have become conventional visual templates of what a valid insight should look like. Post-it notes’ enhanced synoptic presentability affords their arrangement on such templates and thus the quick production of ritual insights.

Latour has emphasized the crucial advantage of the fact that “the two-dimensional character of inscriptions allow them to merge with geometry,” as this makes “space on paper . . .
continuous with three-dimensional space,” and hence, “we can work on paper with rulers and numbers, but still manipulate three-dimensional objects. . . . Better still, because of this optical consistency, everything, no matter where it comes from, can be converted into diagrams and numbers, and combinations of numbers and tables can be used which are still easier to handle than words or silhouettes” (Latour 1986:22). The fact that Post-it notes, due to their enhanced synoptic presentability, can be easily arranged on ready-made frameworks to produce ritual insights suggests that in addition to the cognitive advantages provided by the mastery of geometry and mathematics, an “anthropology of geometry and mathematics” (Latour 1986:26) must also train its lens on the social prestige of geometric forms, numbers, and diagrams (cf. Brenneis 2006; Riles 1998; Strathern 2006).

Post-it notes afford another crucial advantage with respect to “the staging . . . of dramatized inscriptions” or a “theater of proofs” (Latour 1986:19) in the “rhetorical or polemical situation” (Latour 1986:14) of securing allies. Post-it notes’ unique combination of mobility and immobility due to their weak adhesive properties, which gives them enhanced synoptic presentability, as well as the fact that they are held to be reflective of reality via the knowledge inscribed on them, afford the real-time diagramming in two-dimensional space of the reasoning process that has presumably led to the final insights. The facilitators emphasized the need to present the insights “that we’ve already developed” and how these insights relate to each other in the form of a story arc. In practice sessions, a participant from each team narrated the reasoning process that had presumably culminated in the final insights, while other participants from his team attached Post-it notes on a visual representation of a story arc in a way that aligned with and, indeed, diagrammed the narrative in real time (fig. 10). The purpose of this diagramming, which is a kind of ritual semiosis—that is, a ritual event that dynamically figures in different modalities the concrete effects it is meant to have in the real world and that is meant to have such effects precisely by virtue of such figuration (Wilf 2015a)—is to encourage the client to inhabit this reasoning process and to accept its conclusions. Jeffery explained:

What you are creating is a platform for them to make decisions off of. . . . They are going to be thinking about ideas and thinking about concepts, and you want to be giving
them a direction to go in. And it might be, “we learned this, we had these conversations, these are the things that we found, this is the micromarket that we think you should be targeting, and based on our analysis of the different products that [the target audience] was using outside of [the client’s online platform] it seems these three areas were really of interest to them.” That, to me, is a story arc that we are getting somewhere and [the client] is like, “OK, we need to incorporate that.”

Note Jeffery’s emphasis on “giving [the client] a direction to go in,” which effectively means making the client inhabit—“incorporate”—the same direction of the story arc presumably underlying the participants’ reasoning process and its conclusions. The facilitators emphasized that a good story arc must have a narrative structure or, as Jeffery explained, “a beginning, middle, and an end . . . What is the start? How are we bringing [the client] in? What is the excitement? What is the core? What do we want to be telling them? And then normally there is an ‘ask’ at the end, right? This is what [the client] should be doing. That’s the recommendation” or, as David explained, the “denouement.”

Latour treats synoptic presentation either synchronically, as when he discusses the astronomer Tycho Brahe, who arrived at new insights because he had at his disposal different data that he could compare to one another, or in terms of “empty compartments” in “any classification scheme . . . [that] define what is left for us to find” (Latour 1999:51)—in other words, in terms of the diachronic unfolding of the research process itself. However, a classification scheme and any other visual framework that allows for the synoptic presentation of data can also be used for performative and rhetorical effects by taking advantage of those empty compartments in it to ritually diagram in real time and thus naturalize and make inhabitable the unfolding of a presumed reasoning process and its conclusions (Wilf 2015a; cf. Miyazaki 2006:215–216).

For example, one of the key strategies that my team devised with David’s and Jeffery’s help was to show to the client in which quadrant on a 2 × 2 matrix (which functioned as my team’s key framework) it is currently situated and in which quadrant it would want to be situated given its mission statement. In the fourth week, when my team rehearsed their final presentation to the client, members discussed, in Cory’s words, whether “to say in what quadrant [the client] is now and in
what quadrant they want to be.” Jeffery intervened: “Showing the movement is important, where they are and where they want to be.” David added: “[And then] you could tell them how to resolve that tension.” During the final presentation in the fifth week, the team members narrated their research according to the specific story arc they had rehearsed in the previous week, and they successively attached small rectangular Post-it note look-alike pieces of paper with tape on their backside on the $2 \times 2$ matrix in real time. Each piece of paper had one of the short and succinct words or phrases they had come up with in the previous weeks. Significantly, one of these pieces of paper had the client’s logo printed on it, by means of which the desired movement of the client along the $2 \times 2$ matrix was diagrammed in real time.

After the final presentations, when my team members withdrew to a corner of the room to discuss their experience, David came over to us. He was excited. He pointed to the presentation board, where a few of the client’s representatives were facing our $2 \times 2$ matrix and having a discussion, and said:

Hey guys, I want to point something out for you that is very interesting. Your amazing framework—they [the client’s representatives] have been standing around your framework and having a conversation around it for the past 4 minutes and saying, “well, we want to be here, but we need a component of this. We do this now, but we don’t do this now, so how are they connected, and”—so you created a framework for the conversation. That’s the power. They are using your framework to have a dialogue about what they do want to be. I just took a minute of a video of that, of them having that conversation. [Shows the video with his cell phone] So you guys really created a very simple framework that does frame the debate for them: “where do we want to be.”

David’s response to my question about the frameworks in the interview I quoted above, given 2 weeks after the workshop's end, was based on this incident. Both the incident and David’s comments in the interview point to the rhetorical power that results from Post-it notes’ enhanced synoptic presentability due to their weak adhesive properties and unique combination of mobility and immobility, which afford the real-time dramatized arrangement of Post-it notes on conventional visual templates of what a valid insight should look like.

“You Get What You Pay For”: The Post-it Note Economy and Its Discontents

In this article, I have analyzed the Post-it note as a key semiotic technology that enables the faster generation of ideas in post-Fordist institutional contexts of business innovation, which put a premium on instantaneous results. I have specifically highlighted two features of Post-it notes that are responsible for their success. First, their small dimensions afford pragmatic ambiguity and consequently the decoupling of data from the reality of the market under the guise of its reflection. Second, their weak adhesive properties afford the synoptic arrangement of such pseudodata on ready-made frameworks that have become conventional visual templates of what a valid insight should look like and thus the quick production and real-time diagramming of ritual insights.

To conclude, I want to argue that Post-it notes’ ubiquity in post-Fordist contexts of business innovation does not come without a price and that this price is related to post-Fordism’s broader experiential contours and discontents. First, if the Post-it note’s small dimensions afford pragmatic ambiguity and the decoupling of data from the reality of the market under the guise of its reflection, such pragmatic ambiguity often produces confusion and a subsequent desire for clarity among the same people who deploy it as a resource. Consider the following exchange that took place in the third week:

David. That’s a really interesting tension: tools versus dialogue. What is the tool they are looking for? . . . There is no dialogue where [the target audience] congregates online?

Jonathan. Well, there are spaces, but they didn’t come up in our interviews. Conferences came up.

Cory. Facebook groups. [Points at a Post-it note on which the word “conferences” is written]

Cory. There are other resources where this happens: Facebook.

David. Facebook. [Points at a Post-it note on which the word “Facebook” is written] There are other resources where this happens: Facebook.

Jonathan. I hate “dialogue.” [Points at the “dialogue” Post-it note] It doesn’t mean anything.

David. I understand. . . . Maybe you should isolate what kind of support they find on Facebook or in private. Like, I don’t understand—what’s good about Facebook, what are they getting there? . . . So tools versus dialogue is really fascinating, a great metaphor, I know what these are by themselves, but we need to understand what they find there, why they go there. Why aren’t there conferences in the [organizations]?

Cory. I hate “dialogue.” [Points at the “dialogue” Post-it note] It doesn’t mean anything.

After trying to represent the empirical reality in which they are interested by means of single words or phrases arranged in terms of catchy tensions on individual Post-it notes, David and the team members realized that they were not really sure what these words and phrases mean in the context of this empirical reality. Cory argued that dialogue “doesn’t mean anything,” and David argues that “Facebook” denotes very little information. Indeed, that the participants came up with a “Facebook” Post-it note even though Jeffery, in a quote I
discussed above, explicitly used "Facebook" as an example of a meaningless Post-it note, is highly indicative of the pragmatic ambiguity mandated by using Post-it notes as a semiotic technology. In addition, note that although it was David who distilled the tension between tools and dialogue in a vignette I quoted above, he acknowledges that he is not sure what this tension and its terms mean in the context of the reality that is the subject of inquiry. David likes this tension because it "is really fascinating, a great metaphor"—that is, more because of its rhetorical force than its referential content or empirical validity.

In the following week, when David and Jeffery asked the participants to share what they liked and disliked about the previous week’s work, Angela replied with a metacommentary on the pragmatic ambiguity that pervaded so many of the terms used in the workshop: “I wish the term ‘insight’ would be less vague. I feel that certain words could mean many things. Or the definition of ‘deliverable’ could be very helpful.” The facilitators used the words “insight” and “deliverable” time and again to denote the results of the idea-generation strategies taught and implemented in the workshop. Angela’s comment about the pragmatic ambiguity of key terms that are indigenous to these strategies suggests that pragmatic ambiguity is not only a tool consultants deploy during the innovation process but is also a condition that afflicts them. Indeed, Angela’s comment about the ambiguity of the term “deliverable” is highly significant for another reason. “Deliverable” has come to be identified with corporate jargon itself. Together with other words, it has found a place in lists of “the most annoying business slang,” 16 “10 of the worst examples of management-speak,” 17 and “the worst workplace jargon.” 18 These lists highlight the meaningless of such corporate jargon. Pragmatic ambiguity, which, to be sure, is part of any professional jargon, might be exacerbated in institutional contexts pervaded by post-Fordist normative ideals of time-space compression and distillation and specifically in those post-Fordist contexts in which the Post-it note is the semiotic technology of choice. The pragmatic ambiguity that results from the liminal status of the Post-it note between mutability and immutability due to its small dimensions, which is a condition of possibility for the faster generation of ideas, thus produced discontent and a subsequent desire for more clarity among the people who used this ambiguity as a resource.

Second, if Post-it notes’ weak adhesive properties made them suddenly fall off the walls after being used only a few times. For example, in a session in the third week, each team had an hour to transfer their data to Post-it notes and then to experiment with them. The instructions were for each team to post new Post-it notes on the table and write on them and then post them on the walls and experiment with them on the ready-made frameworks. However, it soon turned out that because they were first posted on the table, it subsequently became impossible to post some of the Post-it notes on the walls, let alone experiment with them by moving them on the ready-made frameworks. Post-it notes soon started to fall from the walls. David told my team, “You need to stick [new Post-it notes]. I will give you another set. . . . Don’t let stickiness keep you from working.” When Jeffery approached another team, the following exchange took place:

Kate [a participant]. They [Post-it notes] keep falling.

Jeffery. This is why you have all these Post-it notes on the floor?

Kate. Yes, the blue Post-it notes are the worst!

Jeffery. They might be from Staples.

The problem of Post-it notes falling off the walls led to different kinds of experimentation on the material qualities of the Post-it notes so that they would stick better, at the expense of experimentation with the Post-it notes themselves to generate insights. The facilitators and participants debated whether there is a specific technique of pulling a new Post-it note from a stack of Post-its such that the Post-it note would stick better on the wall. Jeffery suggested that there is such a technique: grab a Post-it note from the side and pull it sideways, rather than grabbing it from the bottom and pulling it upward. The participants experimented with this technique to no avail. Eventually, when nothing else worked, David and Jeffery prepared dozens of small pieces of scotch tape, which participants attached to individual Post-it notes to make them stick. In this way, the liminal status of Post-it notes between mobility and immobility due to their weak adhesive properties, which is a condition of possibility for their enhanced synoptic present-ability and the faster generation of ritual insights, produced discontent and a subsequent desire for more stability among the people who used these weak adhesive properties as a resource.

As Harvey has argued, if post-Fordism has put a high premium on “learning to play the volatility right” or, better yet, on “mastering or intervening actively in the production of volatility” (Harvey 1990:286–287), it has also resulted in “opposed sentiments and tendencies. . . . The greater the ephemerality, the more pressing the need to discover or manufacture some kind of eternal truth that might lie therein” (Harvey 1990:292). Phenomena such as “religious revival,” “the search for authenticity and authority in politics,” “the revival of interest in

basic institutions (such as the family and community), and the search for historical roots are all signs of a search for more secure moorings and longer-lasting values in a shifting world” (Harvey 1990:292).

This duality of post-Fordism was reflected in my team’s discussion of the nature of the Post-it note as a double-edged sword at the very end of the workshop’s final session. When Angela said that she liked the Post-it notes because “I like brainstorming and thinking in that way and writing stuff down and putting it up and then organizing them later,” Cory interjected: “They need better glue.” To which Amanda responded, “If you get the cheap ones, you get what you pay for. You can also get those notes that are all sticky, not just [sticky on] the top, so those obviously stick.” Amanda’s comment can be understood as an unintended metacommentary on post-Fordist liquidification of the means of production in general, whether such liquidification entails the shift to using a liquid (i.e., temporary) workforce or using a quintessentially liquid semiotic technology such as the Post-it note.19 “You get what you pay for”: quickly generated insights whose relation to the market can become tenuous, increased ambiguity that seeps into business organizations themselves, and sensations of precarity of different kinds—of workers and their work. Getting “those notes that are all sticky, not just [sticky on] the top,” as Amanda suggests, might be a solution for the discontent generated by such liquidification, but it is a solution that is bound to remain unrealized in an economy determined to find new ways to accelerate the turnover time of capital.

The fact that the participants’ somber reflections were precipitated by the Post-it notes’ lack of stickiness and subsequent random rearrangement on the floor is ironic on multiple levels. To begin, the client’s mission to the participants, as Jeffery articulated at the beginning of the workshop, was “to create a more sticky [online] community for the [target audience] so that they stay and continue to post projects. The retention rate is 30%. [The client] wants it to be 50%–60%. This is what the project is all about.” The client’s problem of stickiness was thus attempted to be solved by means of an artifact with its own problems of stickiness, as it were.

More important, however, is the fact that the invention of the Post-it note has become a popular case study in the business-management literature on successful innovation (Mo- lotch 2003:45; Wong 2011). Its invention, as well as the way in which the company 3M afforded it, have provided an organizational template for how to generate innovative products and services (Wilf 2015b:684). The Post-it note has thus come to represent the kind of successful innovative “deliverables” that contemporary capitalism can offer, in addition to the ideational means with which future innovative “deliverables” can be generated. And yet, it is precisely by virtue of the Post-it notes’ failure that the participants have come to reflect on the shortcomings of contemporary capitalism in general, of its institutional exemplars (such as Staples), and of its specific “deliverables” (such as the Post-it note). Post-it notes’ failure, itself due to the surplus of liquidification that they embody in their very materiality—liquidification that is supposed to be their promesse du bonheur—suddenly transformed them from celebrated means of creative ideation to banal artifacts randomly scattered on the floor. Their new and unwelcome random configuration no longer indexed capitalism’s capacity to generate a bright innovative future via monetizable serendipity. Rather, it lifted the veil on the chaos, noise, and entropy that often underlie capitalism’s promises to generate such a future and its attempts to fulfill those promises.

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Comments

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After reading this article, I realized: now I have to write a comment—oy—what should I say? My office was hot and stuffy, so I decided to go for a walk to clear my head and perhaps gather the inchoate tendrils of ideas into something more substantial. I slipped on my jacket and grabbed a pad of Post-it notes lying on my desk and a pen on the off chance that I had an inspiration I needed to jot down quickly. And then I realized what I had just done. This is how ubiquitous Post-it notes are in the genre ecologies (Spinuzzi 2004) we compile for tracing emergent ideas—even Eitan Wilf’s commentors pocket Post-it notes to scribble down their thoughts about his thoughts on the confining portability of Post-it notes.

And indeed, a block away from my office, I scribbled a few words on a Post-it note that, if anyone else would stumble
across this note, now safely in my recycling bin, would probably not mean anything at all to them. Even you, a reader who presumably has already thought alongside the same article I was thinking alongside will require my explanation for why these words—“hiding the market, Harvey—not quite right?”—might constitute an engagement with Wilf’s article. And this need for context and interpretation speaks to one of Wilf’s insights about how Post-it notes can potentially function to provide a collage of reduced context produced through Post-it note juxtapositions or, at other moments, to quickly decontextualize knowledge already made simple. In fact, in Wilf’s ethnographic example, a Post-it note begins in the early stages of a business-innovation workshop to require a surrounding collage and then, over time, is transferred to ambiguously represent some putative insight on its own (if its adhesive lasts). In tracing these transitions, Wilf ethnographically reveals one of the paradoxes that US businesspeople encounter repeatedly in today’s market practices—that the promise of context-specific insights and the importance of specialized market niches are all too often constantly praised and systematically discarded in these workshops. Wilf promises to explore a frequently overlooked aspect of David Harvey’s flexible accumulation—how our contemporary form of capitalism encourages “the exploration of highly specialized and small-scale market niches” (Harvey 1990:156). What Wilf in fact shows is that while designers may pay lip service to focusing on local contexts and local needs, the practices surrounding Post-it notes as inscription devices involve decontextualizing market knowledge so that the resulting innovation can supposedly travel across as many contexts as possible. While capitalism has long contained a tension between standardization versus localization, Wilf reveals how the local is transformed into the standard even in moments when everyone involved claims to be trying to privilege niche knowledge by mobilizing the strength of small, weak-glued paper.

That is, designers may begin by trying to use research methods that reveal how to engage with consumers in highly specialized niches, but Post-it notes become devices to conceal indexicality rather than reveal it. Indeed, as Post-it notes travel from one workshop exercise to the next, each time their reconfiguration breaks down the possibility of tracing backward how workshop leaders and participants came to the conclusions that they did. In fact, the chains of indexicality underlying market knowledge created in these workshops are almost the exact inverse of the reversible indexicality that Bruno Latour argues underlies scientific knowledge in Pandora’s Hope. Latour explains that scientists attempt to ensure that each sample’s movements can be traced backward and forward through the many contexts through which it travels (hence, reversibility), an indexicality manufactured through the inscription practices that surround samples as they are transported. Wilf shows in detail that market knowledge, by contrast, is created to prevent the possibility of reversing any indexical chains, thus opening the door to the belief that this market knowledge is scalable and applicable for every market. While scientific knowledge appears to gain authority and credibility through being grounded, market innovation appears to gain its persuasive ability through juxtaposition with other distilled semiotic tokens in a generic (and hence immediately recognizable) framework.

Having proposed that Wilf downplays how his argument complicates Harvey’s take on flexible accumulation, I want to suggest that Wilf similarly downplays the possibilities his analysis opens up for actor-network theory in general by focusing on Latour’s immutable mobiles. Latour, after all, does not argue that all inscriptions that support modern bureaucracies and modern notions of objectivity are immutable mobiles but simply that modern institutions require that some inscriptions be immutable mobiles. This quibble aside, Wilf’s point that some mobiles travel precisely because they are mutable in the appropriate way is well taken. Wilf raises the possibility that a considerable amount of material-semiotic labor goes into creating inscriptions that are ephemeral in the right way (and not the wrong way, as when a Post-it note requires Scotch tape to stay attached to a wall). Actor-network theory posits that stability or durability is a minor miracle and that analysts need to uncover how this durability is created. And here is Wilf’s imaginative intervention—pointing out that it is not just durability that is a minor miracle but ephemerality (of the right sort) as well. He opens up a new set of questions for those with a predilection for actor-network theory—when is the actor-network veering toward durability, and when is it veering toward a desired temporary collection of words, objects, actants, and relationships that will dissolve or disappear in just the right way at the right time?

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Chatty Labor of the Post-it Note

At the corner of Forest Avenue and High Street in downtown Palo Alto is IDEO, the birthplace of Design Thinking. Through its glass-fronted entrance and extra large windows in a deliberately unassuming, flat, boxy office building, pedestrians are invited to peek inside, where whiteboards populated with Post-it notes of multiple bright colors overwhelmingly stand out against the otherwise bare, monotonous, workshop-like space. It is a spectacle of some sort: the wonder of a humble note sheet eventually leading to a big business and problem-solving on a global scale. Not unlike a cocktail napkin with quick scribbles of business plans on its back (it has already been advertised as the “Silicon Valley napkin”) or the unremarkable garages that were the birthplaces of Hewlett-Packard and Apple, the Post-it note shares the aura and myth of such humble origins of Silicon Valley entrepreneurship and allegorizes the essential qual-
ites of agility, virtuosity, and flexibility required for both management and labor to survive the strictures of the post-Fordist economy.

Through a thoughtful, ethnographically informed semiotic analysis of the Post-it note, Eitan Wilf’s article strips the Post-it note of its aura and discloses its porosity and ambiguity as a communicative event. The article undoes the way the Post-it note gets mobilized into a particular mode of knowledge production suitable for today’s ever differentiating and shifting markets. It aims to create a recognizable discursive distinction called “innovation.” Wilf captures the semiotic working of the Post-it note as a media technology that organizes as a social event the processing of the rapid generation of constative statements that are decontextualized and physically displaced into separate notes as ideas. They are then spatially rearranged to form a new discursive relationship among statements qua notes with the help of thepregiven template.

In fact, the Post-it note has been around since the late 1970s, and the Post-it note brainstorming itself is probably nothing new. Prior to its availability, similar functions and goals were performed by other paper media such as index cards and file folders. Writers including Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Marshall McLuhan, and Ludwig Wittgenstein famously actively used index cards for their writing. More familiar than and prior to the Post-it note, many students, scholars, and businesspeople in Japan used the K.J. method developed by cultural anthropologist Kawakita Jiro (1920–2009) in the late 1960s, based on his experience of field research in Nepal. Here, anthropological data is processed, instead of and in addition to field notebooks, by note cards and their mobility for a quintessential deductive reasoning. Any referential statement qua a note card, including the Post-it note itself, can thus serve not only as a mnemonic and archival medium for storage but also as an operational and organizational medium for generating new discourse valuable for specific ends of knowledge production.

But we are invited in this article to consider the historically specific connection between the material and spatial capacity of the Post-it note and post-Fordist labor organization, in which the Fordist undifferentiated market of mass production has been replaced by highly differentiated and differentiating (and short-haul) markets. The change marks a mutation of the meaning of capital efficiency and productivity. Wilf argues that the Post-it note complies with post-Fordist production by putatively accelerating the speed of generating new and valuable discourse as strategies and solutions for the new economy.

What could also be showcased more explicitly here, however, is the Post-it note’s material and discursive participation in the production of the sociality and subjectivity of workers in the new economy. Flexible production needs flexible—precarious and contingent—workers equipped with a wider range of skills than assembly-line, deskilled, and atomized tasks. The Post-it note thus provides participants with an object lesson to make themselves agile and flexible subjects, ready to engage in short-term projects and to swiftly adjust to another project with another set of people.

Wilf’s ethnography also shows us the extent to which the Post-it note session is imbued with political imaginaries of “radical collaboration,” as practitioners of Design Thinking would put it. It embraces decentralization and heterogeneity, a mode of labor organization made up of workers from different disciplines and backgrounds working toward the shared goal. Anonymized notes that saturate the whiteboard flatten the potential hierarchy and relative values of both the participants and the statements inscribed on the notes. Everyone’s idea counts, and “all of us are smarter than any of us” (Brown 2009:26).

The collectivity envisioned in and by the Post-it note session distinguishes itself from mere “working together” in the assembly line discussed by Marx (1973:477) in that the former is resolutely social and thus communicative. If Fordism shaped human labor as inherently alienating workers from their product, post-Fordism is eager to expand production in fixed capital into the social activity, which is, by default, communicative activity or “work while communicating” (Marazzi 2011:24). Such chatty labor is famously exemplified by Toyota’s kanban system of production management by communication. The new economy thus demands not only the whole person and not only his or her parcelled skills but also the transindividual collective of the common, the social relationship itself as (nonfixed) capital.

Wilf’s informants in the workshop are about to perform such post-Fordist “labor as social,” in which labor inherently entails social communication and general communicative skills that would allow them to flexibly adjust and readjust to the production of the new economy that is inherently uncertain and precarious. Developing a high tolerance for ambiguity and the linguistic indeterminacy of fragments of notes is perhaps the essential part of the Post-it note object lesson, rather than being an unanticipated glitch.

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Eitan Wilf begins his insightful ethnographic exploration of the affordances of the Post-it note as a semiotic technology by cannily locating this seemingly trivial object within a paradox of post-Fordist capitalism. Post-Fordist capitalist circulation (production and distribution) appears typified by cutting-edge technologies, by turns algorithmic and robotic, operating over vast scales of distance and speed—typical exemplars of the “technological sublime.” How is it, then, that the creative professionals overseeing innovation—the “faster generation of ideas for new products and services”—seem to be transfixed by the sublime potential of seemingly primitive semiotic technologies such as the Post-it note, “a small rectangular piece of
paper with weak adhesive properties”? After all, for many of us, the affordances of the Post-it note (a small writing space plus a promiscuous ability to be affixed anywhere) as semiotic technology may have less to do with sublime creative innovation than mundane instrumentality: the Post-it note as a petty weapon of passive aggression between housemates (“You left this in the microwave when you were drunk, idiot”) or a way of clarifying the private ownership of foodstuffs in a communal refrigerator (“My food is not your food. Don’t eat it. Duh”).20

Wilf’s analysis takes the Post-it note from such petty capitalist genres of denoting space and possession to sublime vistas disclosing the whole capitalist culture of circulation in which it operates and that it also epitomizes. Wilf locates the Post-it note in the spaces of post-Fordist capitalism, the vast gulfs that sunder contemporary capitalist production in two, where commodities are stereotypically always “made in China” but “designed (created) in California.” On the one hand, there is the world of creative innovation (stereotypically associated with places like California), the place of innovation, creative professionals wielding Post-it notes. On the other, the uncreative world of (algorithmic, robotic) copying—making or faking—the uncreative execution of these creative innovations on vast scales (stereotypically associated with places like China; Pang 2008).

Having located the Post-it note within the oppositions of contemporary post-Fordist production, which sharply divides production into creation and copying, Wilf turns to exploring the way this object can disclose, in the minutiae of its ritual manipulations as a semiotic technology, the latent logic of the post-Fordist conception of creativity and innovation. Here the affordances of the Post-it note as a semiotic technology are crucial. The Post-it note forces the distillation of ideation into bite-size single-word chunks (that fit on the small writing space), which are able to be moved about, juxtaposed, and otherwise manipulated (by virtue of weak adhesivity) syntagmatically within a conventional visual template. These two affordances make it an excellent avatar for the pervasive ideology of associationism that seems to underpin contemporary corporate culture’s notions of creativity. On the one hand, there is a sense of endless novelty and generativity based on the nonce associations and combinations of these distilled ideas; on the other, these juxtapositions and associations happen within a conventionalized, labeled space. This produces a set of indexical (associational) figurations that provide insights that are nevertheless underwritten by the replicable prestige of ritual provided by the labeled space in which these associations occur: ritual insights. These semiotic properties are also found in the collage-like mood boards used similarly by brand professionals to generate brand personalities (Moore 2003:343), so the pervasive semiotic ideologies and practices of associationism (Moore 2003) appear to generate parallel genres of graphic artifacts in parallel creative fields such as branding.

Wilf’s work here expands in delightful ethnographic detail this strongly associationist ideology and material enactment of creativity afforded by the Post-it note as a semiotic technology, as well as the unintended consequences of some of these affordances, such as when the adhesive fails and the Post-it notes flutter to the floor like leaves, producing new juxtapositions that were not felt to be potentially generative of innovation but instead potentially emblematic of the shoddy commodities and other defects of post-Fordist capitalism, where ephemeral also means precarity. His discussion of the manipulation of the Post-it note as a semiotic technology to produce ritual insights thus combines a strong dimension of Petrcean secondness (the one-to-one association of idea to note, combined with the weak adhesive properties of the notes themselves, allows the notes to be indexically juxtaposed in various ways to generate endless juxtapositions and thus endless associations and insights) combined with a weaker dimension of thirdness (the conventional associations of labeled spaces on the board on which these juxtapositions happen produces a kind of weak classification).

The mention of ritual insights generated by semiotic technologies or graphic artifacts for some reason calls to mind the original semiotic technology of ritual theory, the churinga. After all, at the risk of being taken as that kind of academic who tries to shoehorn Durkheim into everything, the Post-it note is almost like a capitalist churinga, an object that, Durkheim famously argued in a footnote (1915:127, n. 4), was not only a sacred object but also an aesthetic one (“the first form of art”) and a graphic artifact (a conventional “written language”), showing that “the origins of design and those of writing are one. It even becomes clear that men commenced designing, not so much to fix on wood or stone beautiful forms which charm the senses, as to translate his thought into matter.” At once a sacred and an aesthetic object, a semiotic technology and a graphic artifact, the mixture of functions Durkheim assigns the churinga reminds us why the study of material semiotics in early anthropology was so strongly associated with the study of ritual. Invoking recent semiotic theories of ritual, Wilf specifically dwells on the semiotic affordances of the Post-it note to ritually generate and legitimate insights, not only to translate thought into matter but to generate thought from matter by the ritual manipulation of its adventitious material semiotics. But just as the Post-it note is an actor within these capitalist rituals of creativity that are at once innovative and yet oddly repetitive, it is also a kind of emblem of them, inasmuch as the Post-it note is the very object most often invoked in the mythology of capitalist creativity, the sacred object whose accidental invention epitomizes the post-Fordist cult of creative innovation that is the ritual text of every TED talk (Frank 2013). The Post-it note becomes a ritual object not only because it is manipulated in a quasi-ritual manner but also because it is itself sacred, the myth of its own creation be-

ing itself a story of the very kind of creativity that it mediates in everyday rituals.

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In his essay, Wilf argues that a diffident square of sticky colored paper, because of its particular material properties, helps instantiate and reinscribe post-Fordist conditions of production in contemporary sites of business innovation. His analysis of the Post-it note is chiefly premised on (1) its smallness, which constrains what people can write on it, and (2) its adhesiveness, which allows people to stick the note to some surface for public viewing and to restick it elsewhere should the need arise. I’m sympathetic to Wilf’s overall argument and the broader conceptual framework that emerges from his analysis. However, I think there’s more going on in this story than he has presented, much of which is left underexamined. That said, what follows should be read less as a critique and more as an alternative interpretive cut in the data Wilf has presented.

First, Post-it notes are used as more than practical tools for organizing ideation. In addition to the important mediation work that Wilf identifies, Post-it notes—in particular, their prominent, quasi-chaotic arrangement on vertical surfaces—function as a critical indexical icon of value for clients who expect to see evidence that their money has been well spent. As design anthropologist Jamer Hunt phrased it in a 2010 piece at Fast Company, “the Post-it portrait accomplishes the work of saying, ‘creativity and leaps of imagination happened here.’ It puts the gloss on innovation” (Hunt 2010).

While Wilf does acknowledge the visual-rhetorical function of Post-its for communicating with clients, he stresses, following his informants, the placement of notes and their particular lexical content in shaping an argument, rather than the persuasive power that is projected through the aesthetics of the entire collection itself. These notes and photographs of these notes (the Post-it portrait) are a material documentation of a process otherwise suffuse with ephemera, and as such, they retain significant perduring value in the business-innovation context even when their mediating function breaks down (or outright fails), which we glimpse in the essay’s conclusion.

Second, I think Wilf’s analysis rests too comfortably on an agency of artifacts. One problem with the concept of affordance is that it often nudges us to overextend expressions of grammatical agency in ways that grant inanimate objects a genuine capacity for performing social action. While the concept of affordance does productively draw us toward considering the thing itself, it also pulls us away from examining the human agents who put those affordances to work in particular courses of action. All of which is to say, where Wilf sees the Post-its doing a lot of work here, I instead see people putting the Post-it notes to work, a subtle but consequential difference of interpretation.

The ideation activities that the workshop participants were asked to do—not just in Wilf’s study but in plenty of similar contexts—are, to put it bluntly, fuzzy, confusing, and weird, as Angela alludes to when she says (echoing Alice’s challenge to Humpty Dumpty), “I wish the term ‘insight’ would be less vague. I feel that certain words could mean many things.” To manage that fuzziness over time, the organizers continuously inject different sorts of form and structure into ongoing activities to help scaffold the experience—or give the illusion—of getting somewhere and reaching a goal. These different structures are what we could call redactions, intentionally severe formal truncations (though whether they all lean ad absurdum is up for debate), all of which are harmonized by the organizers for effectively ordering the progress of the workshop. The Post-its are the most obvious example, but there are others. For instance, the organizers provide person boards, which require and structure particular information, as well as a handout with simple, ready-made explanatory frameworks, and they encourage participants to use them. They also introduce binary oppositions as a rhetorical structure, as when David redescribes what one participant says as “tools versus conversations . . . somebody fucking write that down,” and they push participants to exploit basic narrative structure in their pitches. While each of these (material and discursive) redactions affords different things for ideation, it’s largely the organizers who set the parameters for how participants should exploit them.

Take the Post-it notes. While they may afford jotting down single words or ideas, they certainly don’t require it, and in fact, it is Jeffery who explicitly tells participants exactly what they should do, saying, “make sure there is actually a complete thought going on”—advice that is later augmented when he instructs participants to label their supportive notes. Additionally, Post-its don’t inherently afford being used within binary rhetorical structures, but they are operationalized as such when the organizers show participants how to do so.

My point here is that while Post-it notes are certainly doing a lot of work in these workshops, that work is possible only because of the specific ways in which the organizers make the Post-its relevant for the participants within conditions the organizers themselves produce. And these conditions include, among other things, the ongoing harmonizing of various material and discursive devices that intentionally generate desired outcomes—such as the Post-it portrait, the best evidence that innovation work has actually taken place.

As I alluded to at the start, my response mostly reflects a difference in emphasis rather than a true disagreement, and it doesn’t particularly challenge Wilf’s central claims. But I think the difference has some significant implications. My concern is that by centering our analytic gaze on specific objects (such as Post-its) and overemphasizing their power to do things in the world and then redistributing everything else in the analysis...
around them, we end up missing the complex ways in which accountable human actors purposefully orchestrate forms toward reaching particular ends. While I’m certainly convinced that Post-it notes play a significant role in the post-Fordist economy, I think this has less to do with their particular affordances than with how interested human actors specifically put them to work.

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Cogs in the Wheel of Innovation

I begin with a confession, which is that I read Eitan Wilf’s text from the position of one mildly traumatized by an earlier career in which I regularly found myself hailed by the call to brainstorm and to Post-it. Thus, joining in a critique of the Post-it note is not simply an intellectual exercise but has some aspects of catharsis.

Another lingering effect of my years in the Silicon Valley is that I can no longer use the word “innovation” without scare quotes. The Post-it note has, of course, itself been granted the identity of an innovation, albeit one that is, as Wilf points out, “a small rectangular piece of paper with weak adhesive properties.” In fact, it is precisely that weakness that constitutes the breakthrough. At the same time, I’m reminded of a lunchtime conversation during the decades of my residence at Xerox’s Palo Alto Research Center, with a 3M designer who used the phrase “Post-it note failure” to characterize the lure of digital alternatives to that hardy little paper artifact. The very same brainstorm and to Post-it. Thus, joining in a critique of the Post-it note is not simply an intellectual exercise but has some aspects of catharsis.

While another (seemingly unwittingly) punned, “it’s going to be one cohesive idea per Post-it note.” The limits of real estate on the Post-it note require that what is recognizably an idea takes the form of a sound bite; thus, the material topology of the Post-it note and the acceptable length of an idea’s expression are mutually constituted. Ideas have a normative legible form, in sum, which must be mastered, along with the standardized formats through which they are reliably and efficiently translated into insights.

As Wilf’s ethnographic account makes clear, engagement with the Post-it note quickly passes from voluntary to obligatory in the context of creative practice, as failure to use Post-its is taken as evidence of failure to ideate, and mandatory translation of ideas expressed into PIN(nable) bits enforces the genre. Always framed as a resource made available to participants, the stacks of Post-it notes and their associated markers don’t simply invite use in these contexts but demand it. In a world where brainstorming must be enacted religiously, not to post is, at least, to diminish oneself as an individual innovator and team player and, at worst, a form of apostasy. The joining of bodies to Post-it notes in this context is highly personalized, while, once posted, the Post-it note’s author, like the idea, is duly alienated. Displayed on the board, the array of Post-it notes takes on the authority of the imagined collective mind, however closely participants might track their own contributions or however unilaterally the array might subsequently be arranged.

Wilf also helpfully directs our attention to what he characterizes as the “pragmatic ambiguity” of the Post-it note, insofar as the limits that it places on expression always render it as simply an index into a putatively more extended conceptualization. Wilf’s more specific focus is on the ways in which the Post-it note attenuates what is rendered as data regarding “the reality of the market.” Again I’m reminded of an exercise in Xerox’s product-development organizations during my tenure there in the 1990s, named at the time Voice of the Customer. Here the transcripts from focus groups with those figured as customers for the occasion were literally scissored into bite-size quotations as, to use Wilf’s poetic phrasing, “data about consumers are transferred to a series of textual artifacts of decreasing dimensions.” These could then be mixed, matched, and mobilized, whether as directives to product developers or as justifications of decisions taken. Going one step further on the focus group’s already effective decontextualization of relations between people and the objects of their everyday lives, Voice of the Customer created an even more flexible proxy for the ground truth of customer desire.

A critical anthropology of design, in the end, must begin by problematizing the taken-for-granted terms of the profession, including, in this context, innovation and the ideas that are taken as its foundation. As Wilf rightfully points out, professional design is a highly normative endeavor. Sharing a cognitivist history that has been further enshrined and technologicalized in fields such as neuroeconomics (see Schull and Zaloom 2011), the idea and the commodity are kindred spirits. The
Post-it note’s effects, in this context, are less to make things come into being than to keep the messy contingencies that would interrupt the forward progress of just-in-time innovation at bay and thereby ensure the perpetuation of business as usual. Seeing the Post-it note in this way helps us to resist its simple positioning as a response to late capitalism’s demands for acceleration and to recognize the Post-it note’s modest but very tangible contribution to the reproduction of the innovation economy’s constitutive practices. This is another reminder of how, rather than post-, it is neo-Fordism that characterizes our times.

A corollary is that ritual insights, to again use Wilf’s term, may be most characteristic of businesses that have received innovation training involving the arrangement of Post-it notes. We would not be surprised to find Post-it notes used differently in other enterprises whose workers have not been through this training. This is not to say that ritual insight through (re)arrangement will not be found elsewhere in the business world. It is to say, rather, that if such ritual insights do occur, they must be linked to a broader circulation of metacultural ideas about how to arrange data.

Perhaps the most significant of Wilf’s findings is that the single note does not transparently encode an elementary data unit but is rather often ambiguous. This semiotic ambiguity in part decouples the note from the source data the notes are thought to reflect. On the surface, such a decoupling would seem to render the notes less rather than more useful. Wilf argues, however, that this decoupling plays a productive role. It facilitates the “faster generation of ideas for new products.” With ambiguity comes the possibility for mutation in meaning that is essential to creation of new ideas through the assembling of the isolated into spatially arrayed configurations.

Having narrowed the scope of Wilf’s findings by pointing to the specificity of the ritual insights he describes to the metacultural character of the business operation he observed, I now want to broaden the scope of his findings by suggesting that ambiguity is not only a characteristic of the reduction of data to the Post-it note form. Ambiguity is typical metacultural-to-cultural relations in general. There is always the possibility of such slippage when the cultural phenomenon gets encoded in metacultural form. Take, for example, the imperative, an inherently metacultural form in which the words in the command encode an action to be performed by the one commanded. A case in point would be Jeffery’s admonition to the workshop participants as reported by Wilf: “So make sure there is actually a complete thought going on so somebody can walk up to that and be like, ‘this makes sense as an idea.’” What, precisely, does this mean? If the metaculture (in this case, the command) were transparent to the culture (the idea to be represented on the Post-it note), the workshop presenter would...

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In this theoretical-ethnographic gem, destined to become a core reading in the anthropology of corporations and business-ethnography literatures, Wilf links the pervasive use of the Post-it note in business enterprises to the post-Fordist economy. Following David Harvey, Wilf regards the contemporary economy as one in which innovation in production plays a key role, facilitating the ever more rapid turnover of capital. If innovation supplies the engine of this acceleration, the Post-it note—however seemingly humble and insignificant—is one component of that engine. In contrast to previous brainstorming accounts of the role of the Post-it note, Wilf emphasizes (1) the semiotic ambiguity of the note rather than its encoding of elementary units of knowledge and (2) the ritualized character of the organization of the notes as contrasted with their innovative rearrangement through brainstorming. Without taking exception to Wilf’s findings, I want to sharpen his insight by narrowing it in regard to its ethnographic context and simultaneously broadening it from the perspective of its theoretical ambitions.

In regard to the former, Wilf conducted ethnographic observation of “innovation workshops organized in New York City by innovation consultants and attended by business entrepreneurs.” Such workshops represent a highly specialized type of business activity—a pedagogical activity. Looked at from the perspective of cultural motion, the workshops are about the process of innovation. They are designed to teach businesspeople how to innovate. They are not simply the normal processes of innovation inside an enterprise. The reflexive quality of the workshops, the fact that they are designed to transmit a culture of innovation, means that they are metacultural. If we think of a culture of innovation as a possible characterization of the culture of any business enterprise—a tech company, a Wall Street bank, an automobile manufacturer—the purpose of the enterprise whose workshop Wilf observed is to transmit a culture of innovation to other companies.

Why is this fact important? I think it explains one of Wilf’s key findings—namely, the ritualized character of the semiotic processes involving the Post-it notes he observed. Rather than innovative rearrangements of the notes, as in the brainstorming interpretation, Wilf describes the preset patterns for arranging the notes that the workshop participants learn. The participants are not simply finding patterns in the notes, nor are they spontaneously reorganizing the notes with no preconception of how to arrange them. They are employing formulas they have learned, prefab organizations that have been culturally transmitted to them. These ready-made frameworks, as Wilf describes, are what make the metaculture itself a part of culture—that is, they make the teaching going on in this workshop something that can be repeated in other workshops, something that is transmissible by replicable cultural processes.

A corollary is that ritual insights, to again use Wilf’s term, may be most characteristic of businesses that have received innovation training involving the arrangement of Post-it notes. We would not be surprised to find Post-it notes used differently in other enterprises whose workers have not been through this training. This is not to say that ritual insight through (re)arrangement will not be found elsewhere in the business world. It is to say, rather, that if such ritual insights do occur, they must be linked to a broader circulation of metacultural ideas about how to arrange data.

Perhaps the most significant of Wilf’s findings is that the single note does not transparently encode an elementary data unit but is rather often ambiguous. This semiotic ambiguity in part decouples the note from the source data the notes are thought to reflect. On the surface, such a decoupling would seem to render the notes less rather than more useful. Wilf argues, however, that this decoupling plays a productive role. It facilitates the “faster generation of ideas for new products.” With ambiguity comes the possibility for mutation in meaning that is essential to creation of new ideas through the assembling of the isolated into spatially arrayed configurations.

Having narrowed the scope of Wilf’s findings by pointing to the specificity of the ritual insights he describes to the metacultural character of the business operation he observed, I now want to broaden the scope of his findings by suggesting that ambiguity is not only a characteristic of the reduction of data to the Post-it note form. Ambiguity is typical metacultural-to-cultural relations in general. There is always the possibility of such slippage when the cultural phenomenon gets encoded in metacultural form. Take, for example, the imperative, an inherently metacultural form in which the words in the command encode an action to be performed by the one commanded. A case in point would be Jeffery’s admonition to the workshop participants as reported by Wilf: “So make sure there is actually a complete thought going on so somebody can walk up to that and be like, ‘this makes sense as an idea.’” What, precisely, does this mean? If the metaculture (in this case, the command) were transparent to the culture (the idea to be represented on the Post-it note), the workshop presenter would...
not have had to engage in the repeated reformulation Wilf describes.

This is not to say that metaculture bears no relationship to the culture it is about. Evidently, there is a fit. The metaculture must, in some measure, be faithful to the culture if it is to play a role in relation to that culture. But the existence of a fit does not preclude some measure of indeterminacy or some slippage between the two. In this way, the ambiguity of the individual Post-it note in relation to the data it purports to encode is an instance of a more general phenomenon—the looseness of fit between metaculture and culture. The latter looseness is, in turn, an instance of what happens in the motion of culture more generally: replication, the key process of cultural motion, is rarely, if ever, perfect. Some measure of difference is typically, if not inevitably, introduced. The result, in the case of the metaculture-to-culture relationship, is the ambiguity Wilf so excellently describes.

Reply

NIMBY?

In what follows, I hope to not only clarify some points in my analysis but also draw some parallels between the arguments I make in the article about knowledge production in business innovation and knowledge production in anthropology. The latter is important for three reasons. First, anthropology itself is increasingly pervaded by the norms and values of speed, which might encourage the rapid production of “deliverables” qua publications (Cefkin 2009:18). Second, as I note in the main article, there are calls to include design methods in the anthropological tool kit. Last, for anthropological critique of forms of knowledge production outside of anthropology to have some value, it must be complemented by a critique of anthropological knowledge production itself.

In building her comment toward its final, highly insightful suggestion that teases out my article’s potential contribution in relation to actor-network theory, Gershon nevertheless draws too clear a line between scientific knowledge production and knowledge production in business innovation. To begin, Gershon underestimates the role of pragmatic ambiguity in scientific work. Ventriloquizing Latour, Gershon argues that “scientists attempt to ensure that each sample’s movements can be traced backward and forward through the many contexts through which it travels (hence, reversibility), an indexicality manufactured through the inscription practices that surround samples as they are transported.” What needs to be highlighted is that such samples depend on communicative events to regiment their meaning as indexical signs, because any indexical sign points to potentially infinite objects, and that such communicative events are themselves highly unpredictable (Knorr-Cetina 1981:14). Indeed, even ritual contexts characterized by a dense web of crisscrossing signs that are indexically iconic of one another often fail to achieve their intended meaning because of the inherent indeterminacy of semiosis (Keane 1997). The rigorous analysis of the emergent, real-time communicative events that regiment the meaning of inscriptions has been one of the least developed and least satisfying dimensions of Latour’s work, increasingly so given the growing absence of human actors from actor-network theory (Fischer 2014:350). If Gershon underestimates the role of pragmatic ambiguity in scientific work, she overestimates it in business innovation when she argues that “while designers may pay lip service to focusing on local contexts and local needs, the practices surrounding Post-it notes as inscription devices involve decontextualizing market knowledge so that the resulting innovation can supposedly travel across as many contexts as possible.” This is not the case. While strategies of business innovation are often held to be applicable to many market contexts and even to themselves as a way of “innovating innovation” (Wilf 2015f:680), their results are not usually expected to transcend contexts. An innovative idea in the food industry is not often expected to be relevant to the weapons industry.

Gershon’s notion of concealed or broken indexicallity, then, should best be viewed as a matter of degree, one that should encourage us to also think about broken indexical chains in anthropological knowledge production. The suggestion that the use of Post-it notes in the workshop “breaks down the possibility of tracing backward how workshop leaders and participants came to the conclusions that they did” should give us pause. Is the fact that anthropologists religiously deny access to their field notes not conducive to the production of a similar form of broken indexicality that hinders verification of their conclusions by other scholars? One is also driven to think of citations in this respect. Consider what can be called the Aristotelian unmoved mover—that is, the scholar who rarely cites others but is frequently cited by them, thus indexically establishing an autochthonous status in a field of knowledge, which nevertheless masks the knowledge context on which this scholar relies. Further down the (indexical) food chain are those who cite one another, thereby creating an indexical loop that is self-anchoring (Fischer 2014:333; Marcus 2012:428). Then there is the pragmatically ambiguous general citation—for example, of a book without a specific page, usually preceded by the topical sound bite in vogue (cf. Marcus 2012:429 apropos the fate of the “reflexive turn”). All are forms of broken indexicality that might facilitate the fast production of conclusions whose evolution is not easily traceable and whose soundness is not easily assessable.

The crucial function performed by forms of regimentation such as ideologies and conventions that are instantiated in communicative events is nicely addressed in Murphy’s comment. He correctly argues that Post-it notes “function as a critical indexical icon of value for clients who expect to see evidence that their money has been well spent.” That was pre-
cisely my point in arguing that Post-it notes are indexically iconic of brainstorming—itself synonymous with innovation today—because of their specific material artifactual features that make them Figuratively equivalent to the process of brainstorming as it is diagrammatically imagined to take place in one’s head (small mental building blocks being shuffled and reshuffled, consciously or not, until an insight is serendipitously generated, etc.).

However, to give crucial specificity to the claim that the facilitators, motivated by popular ideologies of creativity and innovation, are the ones who regiment the use of Post-it notes, we cannot dispose of the notion of affordance that Murphy critiques. The classic definition of affordance denotes a complementary relationship between an animal and its environment, in which the environment affords certain actions for an animal but only inasmuch as the animal can perceive and utilize these affordances to good effect. Thus, the air affords lift force for some animals with wings (see Wilf 2015b:686). It is precisely the complementarity of the specificities of the affordance and the one heading it that is key here. The facilitators do not instruct the participants to create origami figures with Post-it notes (although Post-it notes afford this) because they have no need for such figures, and they do not instruct the participants to innovate by chiseling their ideas onto small pieces of marble because such blocks do not afford innovation that is as rapid and cheap as that afforded by Post-it notes.

Post-it notes’ material artifactual features come to the fore in Inoue’s comment, which begins with some of the Post-it note’s predecessors, such as index cards and file folders. Inoue mentions nonanthropologists such as Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Marshall McLuhan, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, who famously used such material artifacts. Another scholar who should be mentioned—one closer to Inoue’s semiotic predilections—is Charles Sanders Peirce, who, in an essay entitled “Training in Reasoning,” advised the following:

An indispensable condition of systematization of any kind is systematic records. Everything worth notice is worth recording; and those records should be so made that they can readily be arranged, and particularly so that [they] can be rearranged. I recommend slips of stiff smooth paper of this exact size. By ordering 20000 at a time, you get them cheap . . . . Upon these slips you will note every disconnected fact that you see or read that is worth recording. . . . After thirty years of systematic study, you have every fact at your fingers’ ends. (1992:188; emphasis in the original)

This vignette makes clear that the devil is in the details. Peirce’s index cards, as well as the filing methods used by the writers Inoue mentions, were not meant to have Post-it notes’ ephemerality, nor did they have Post-it notes’ unique combination of mobility/immobility and mutability/immutability. It is precisely these features that make Post-it notes an appropriate semiotic technology for post-Fordist business innovation.

The most relevant and interesting example that Inoue leaves unmentioned is an example that takes us straight into her disciplinary home:

When Lévi-Strauss first turned his attention to the analysis of myth in the 1950s, he envisaged a machine—a “special device”—consisting of a series of upright boards two meters long and one and a half meters high on which cards containing mythic elements could be “pigeon-holed and moved at will.” As the analysis moved into three dimensions, the cards would need to be perforated and fed through IBM equipment. . . . By the mid-1960s, thoughts of wooden boards, pigeonholes and computing cards had given way to something far more delicate and conceptual: a mobile of wire and thin strips of paper, looping and bending back on themselves. Lévi-Strauss would hang the mobiles from the ceiling in his office, and they turned gently as he worked through the logical possibilities they represented. On paper, the mobiles translated into notionally three-dimensional graphs of myth clusters. (Wilcken 2010:276–277)

Talk about immutable mobiles! If David, one of the innovation workshop facilitators, described Post-it notes as “atoms in the molecules [that] then [through reshuffling] suddenly make organisms,” Lévi-Strauss “likened mythic elements to atoms, molecules, crystals and fragments of glass in a kaleidoscope. . . . He also spoke of making notes on cards and then dealing them out at random in the hope of finding unexpected correlations” (Wilcken 2010:297; cf. Wilf 2015b:686–687).

Some of the results of such strategies of instant knowledge production were notoriously plagued by decontextualization and a decoupling from the ethnographic contexts to which they purported to refer (Leach 1970:97–103), not unlike the decontextualization and decoupling from the market produced by innovation consultants. Fischer offers a critique of recent iterations of 2 × 2 matrixes and similar “fourfold logic” boxes in anthropology (Fischer 2014:332, 348), which are perhaps not accidentally related to the work of one of Lévi-Strauss’s students, Philippe Descola.

The power of such templates resides not only in their conventional association with solid reasoning but also in their being able to suddenly transform what appears to be a cacophony of data into what is felt to be an aesthetically pleasing patterned order within which each datum is meaningfully connected to other data. Hence, in addition to the Peircean secondness and thirdness that Manning points at in his wonderful distillation of my article, Peircean firstness performs an important function in the ideology that regiments business innovation, too. It does so in the form of the internally felt aesthetic pleasure that confirms that a certain arrangement of Post-it notes on a template is effective and true. The way in which key anthropologists applied aesthetic feeling as a criterion for judging the authenticity or inauthenticity of cultures provides a similar example. Genuine cultures were held
to be entities characterized by “the sort of integration one finds in a Bach fugue” (Geertz 1973:145), whereas the felt lack of such integration was held to indicate the existence of a cacophonous and impure mix of elements from different cultures (Wilf 2013b:723–727).

The fact that aesthetic feeling plays a dominant role in business innovation is not surprising, given that innovation is widely understood to be monetizable creativity. It means that business innovation involves the cultivation of a specific subjectivity (Wilf 2014:406). A key dimension of such subjectivity is what Inoue calls a “high tolerance for ambiguity.” Inoue argues that the Post-it note “provides participants with an object lesson to make themselves agile and flexible subjects, ready to engage in short-term projects and to swiftly adjust to another project with another set of people.” What concerns me is the ambiguity in Inoue’s formulation with respect to the effectiveness of this object lesson and similar managerial efforts to transform employees into flexibly creative subjects (Wilf 2015c). As my informants’ comments make clear, they were not comfortable with the pragmatic ambiguity that saturated their use of Post-it notes. At the end of the workshop, they viewed this pragmatic ambiguity as a condition that afflicted them rather than a resource they could use, master, and develop a high tolerance for.

Having had a firsthand experience with the culture of business innovation, Suchman is less ambiguous about and more attuned to the darker undercurrents of the imperative to flexibly go with the pragmatically ambiguous flow. Suchman identifies the cleverness of transforming collaborative creativity into an alienable means of production, a process that gives alienation a sexier appearance: the knowledge worker is invited to be as cool and as collaboratively creative as a jazz player (Wilf 2015c), and at the same time, that conformist compliance with the hype of creative collaboration and horizontal information flow is closely monitored, and failure to comply is quickly sanctioned. At least in this respect, anthropology, with its quasi-misanthropic figure of the lone anthropologist, does not offer an immediate parallel. No pretension (yet) to radical collaboration here! This, of course, does not erase the fact that a growing contingent of anthropologists find themselves today in precarious working conditions and thus having to learn to transform themselves into flexible subjects.

In his comment, Urban offers a way to theorize the highly regimented nature of the innovation processes I describe, including the observable compliance with their strictures. He argues that such compliance stems from the fact that the workshop is a pedagogical setting that is meant to teach businesspeople how to innovate. It should thus be distinguished from “the normal processes of innovation inside an enterprise.” In response, it must be noted that the distinction between the methods learned in the workshop and normal processes of innovation inside an enterprise is somewhat spurious because many enterprises innovate by hiring the services of innovation consultants, such as the ones who organized the workshop. Indeed, the workshop itself provides an example of this hybrid kind of innovation, in that the workshop participants worked on a specific problem presented by a real client, an organization that wanted to innovate its website to achieve higher retention rates among its target audience. Urban argues that “if such ritual insights do occur [elsewhere in the business world], they must be linked to a broader circulation of metacultural ideas about how to arrange data.” My article does precisely that: it traces the innovation strategies inculcated in the workshop back to the iconic Silicon Valley design and innovation firm IDEO (see n. 15), which has become one of the key institutional sites toward which the indexical order of business innovation is currently oriented. Design Thinking and the specific manipulation of Post-it notes therein as disseminated by IDEO are currently widely emulated in the business world and, as I note in the article, even in anthropology (Marcus and Murphy 2011, 2012).

I certainly agree with Urban’s second claim—namely, that pragmatic ambiguity is a general feature of the process of cultural motion at large. The key point, however, is that routinized business innovation under post-Fordist normative ideals of speed and instantaneity puts a premium on maximizing such ambiguity via the use of a semiotic technology such as the Post-it note. This, perhaps, brings us back to Gershon’s insightful question: “When is the actor-network veering toward durability, and when is it veering toward a desired temporary collection of words, objects, actants, and relationships that will dissolve or disappear in just the right way at the right time?” By taking the Post-it note—however humble and insignificant it may seem—as its ethnographic focus, my article provides an answer to this question in the context of post-Fordist business innovation, but it also encourages us to look for similar temporary collections of words, objects, actants, and relationships in other contexts of knowledge production, including in our own anthropological backyard.

—Eitan Wilf

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