

On Ephemerality: Perspectives on Communication Across the Analog-Digital Divide

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URL <http://anthroposts.com>

ABSTRACT At first glance, the pixel and the Post-it couldn't be further apart. One operates within the finite, linear value space of a color ramp, while the other navigates the infinite value space of words and ideas. But though the pixel and the Post-it may seem like complete opposites, a number of compelling similarities exist that bring unique perspective to contemporary modes of communication.

Through a survey of some of these parallels and the introduction of a web-based archive that visualizes a collection of found Post-it notes, this article explores communication in flux, how our impulse to map information remains unmoved at its core, and how this pastel-colored staple of humdrum office life can be seen as an unsuspecting analogue to the ways we work with, organize and make sense of information in the connected age.

INTRODUCTION

Long before the personal computer, before open source and cloud, there was the Post-it. The canary-yellow sticky was the means by which we reminded ourselves of that which we couldn't afford to forget, and how we worked out our ideas in real-time. Collaborative, non-linear editing wasn't done online, but instead through the decidedly analog process of plastering a bunch of Post-it notes to a wall, free to rearrange, realign, and remix.

The invention came about accidentally, and somewhat innocently, when a 3M engineer, fighting to keep the bookmarks of his hymnal in place, realized that the re-bondable adhesive a colleague had developed might provide a solution. The two engineers came together and co-invented the Post-it, which, when released in 1974, went on to become an everyday sight in offices across the globe.

At nine square inches, the Post-it was the perfect fit for the inscription of short-term, transitory text, a welcome alternative to the 8.5 x 11-inch page that, like a blank canvas, seems to demand something more.

Coming in a seemingly endless pad of repositionable 3-inch sheets, the Post-it marked a significant evolution in our capacity to stay organized (and to organize) by productizing the transience, speed, and fragmentation of our higher-level thought processes.

Though it's unclear when they were first used to brainstorm and map ideas, the Post-it fast became the de-facto tool through which informational sense-making occurred. In fact, a sea of Post-its affixed to a wall has become so synonymous with the creative process that some see it pushing the cliché. "As creativity becomes the lubricant of the innovation economy, what says it better than a crazy quilt of Post-its smeared to the wall?" questions Jamer Hunt in "Why Designers Should Declare Death to the Post-it."¹ Hunt reminds us that the Post-it's use as a tool for group ideation is one of many approaches to a complex, multi-faceted design process that follows no single path. "The Post-it portrait accomplishes the work of saying, 'creativity and leaps of imagination happened here.' It puts the gloss on innovation."² He cautions against leaving Post-its up for others to find when the brainstorming session is over, exploiting their iconic ability to signify design thinking at work.

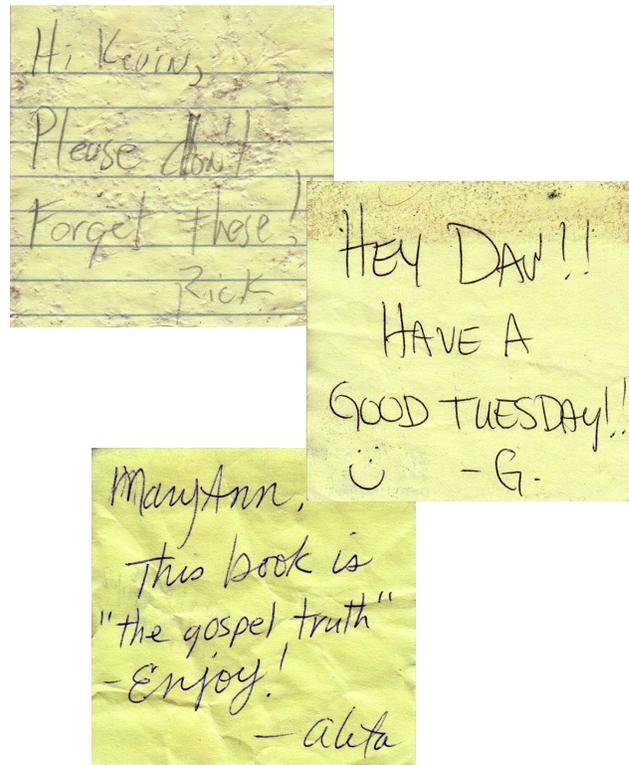


FIGURE 1: Post-its, whose content, in context, could appear as a social media post on a friend's wall.

THE PAPER PIXEL

Undoubtedly, these artifacts of “feverish brainstorming extravaganzas”³ line the walls of agencies and startups everywhere, and the numerous products to have come out of Silicon Valley and Madison Avenue have benefited from the Post-it-enabled brainstorm. However, the invention that set the tone for the startup era—the personal computer—assuredly did not as the Post-it itself had yet to be invented.

In 1973, engineers at Xerox were putting the finishing touches on the Parc, the first computer with a GUI. While this initial step into home computing was prohibitively expensive for the average consumer, Apple put the personal computer within reach of middle-class America with the release of the Macintosh in 1984. In the years since, we’ve become fully absorbed in the PC, and nothing quite conveys the gravity of our affair like the cultural predominance of the web.

According to an Experian study, more than three hours a day is spent online in the U.S. and sixteen minutes of each is spent on social networks.⁴ Individual distinguishing features aside, the activity stream is one of the shared features of all social networks. If we reduce that feature to its essence—a sequential list of posts authored by members of a group (in most cases a network of friends or followers) on what’s commonly referred to as a wall—a sequence of like Post-its stuck to a flat surface doesn’t seem much different. If we consider

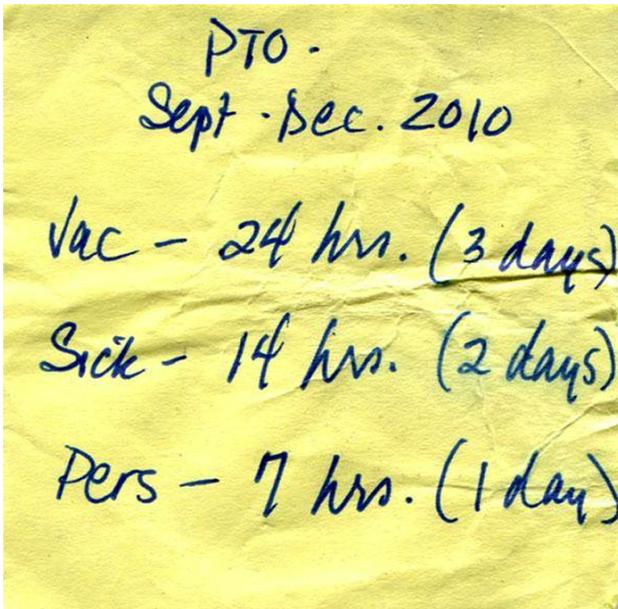


FIGURE 2: A Post-it featuring acronyms (PTO) and abbreviations (Vac, Sick, Pers).

the formal information mapping methodology, which defines an information map as a series of information blocks containing any number of functional units⁵, an activity feed can be seen as a group of like units awaiting further classification (Facebook’s feed, for example, could be theoretically broken out into sub-streams organized by subject or relationship). Pinterest, noted for its distinctive pairing of variably sized boxes with an “infinity scroll,” and whose brand directly references the act of pinning notes to a corkboard that the Post-it innovated, is similarly not a far cry from a selection of variably sized sticky notes arranged in a loose, but consciously spaced, grid.

Alton Brown, a popular host on Food Network, creatively substantiated the blurred lines between posting via analog and digital means by exclusively tweeting pictures of Post-its containing his tweets.⁶ In a similar vein, we might envision an installation of sorts that takes the online offline, in which various individuals posing as friends and family come in and out of a room, adding Post-its containing their status updates to a wall while an engrossed subject looks on. FIGURE 1 (previous page) outlines a few such Post-its whose content could double as a post on a friend’s Facebook wall.

Narrowing our gaze from the macro to the micro, from grid to cell, the comparisons shift from layout to linguistics.

Computer mediated communication, particularly as typified by text messages, chats, and status updates, is notoriously replete with acronyms and abbreviations. And while LOLs and the many gr8 combinations central to “textese” are rare to appear on Post-its verbatim, similar methods of shortening are frequently found.

Though the rectilinear notes come in eight different sizes, the most common is the original 3x3 version, which at nine square inches has ninety percent less space than a standard piece of legal paper. This gross reduction in size forces an abbreviation of words similar to what is frequently seen in digital methods of communication, particularly on Twitter, where the microblogging service’s 140-character size limit necessitates internet speak that champions brevity over the strict adherence to grammatical rules (FIGURE 2 shows one of many found Post-its featuring abbreviated words). Exacerbating the phenomenon are the perceived qualities of a strong social media presence, which prioritize timeliness and relevance over form. “Written-out numbers are the first to get turned into their numerical counterparts,” writes Erin Steiner in Twitter: Don’t Let Brevity Affect Your Grammar. “Next to go are any words that can use single

symbols instead. ‘And’ becomes ‘&.’ ‘At’ becomes ‘@.’ After this, you shorten words to their initials. ‘Because’ becomes ‘b/c’ and ‘With’ and ‘without’ become ‘w/’ and ‘w/o’ respectively [... ..] this is when you will be tempted to toss all the rules of grammar and spelling out the window.”⁷ Interestingly, the limit that encourages such shortening on Twitter was a product of the short message service (SMS) 160-character limit, rather than a consciously imposed feature.⁸

One important distinction in this comparison is audience. When one composes a Post-it one generally writes to oneself, a private act for the author’s eyes only. On the contrary, communicating via digital means—messaging—inherently entails an audience. With texts, chats, and email messages, the audience is a controlled list of recipients directly selected by the sender, while on social media it is comprised of some subset of the user’s approved group of followers, but beyond that uncontrolled. As surely as we’d sound differently on stage than in the shower, writing on a Post-it is undoubtedly influenced by the informality and comfort privacy affords.

FROM SCREEN TO SIDEWALK

I suggest these similarities not to assert that said aspects of digital communication are unequivocally rooted in the Post-it, but to introduce a stream of parallels that became increasingly compelling upon relocating to San Francisco.

Consistently rated one of the most walkable cities in the United States, I got to know the city by foot when I moved there in 2007. Somehow, I took to collecting bits of ephemera I encountered on the sidewalk and in the gutter, and began creating collages that documented the city’s neighborhoods through the discarded items its residents left behind. While I initially cast a wide net, I soon restricted my interest to things that had been written on, and over time came to see pieces of paper bearing handwriting as a type of contemporary urban artifact. I felt as if I was getting to know the culture as an anthropologist might, and the more I collected the more I realized that the majority of these artifacts were Post-its.

Five months after arriving in San Francisco I returned to the East Coast and, after one and a half years there, moved to Buenos Aires. I continued collecting Post-its throughout, and adopted a simple but guiding principle: do not collect a note that is “posted” or appears to be in use, only collect those encountered personally, and, wherever possible, document when and where each note was found at the time of collection.

While there was the occasional gem (see FIGURE 3 for some favorites), most of the Post-its I found contained

relatively mundane pieces of information such as phone numbers and addresses. Since the content was frequently of a rather uninteresting nature on the surface, I began paying attention to the way in which each Post-it’s content, however mundane, was written. The allure of handwriting in lieu of our increased propensity to correspond digitally intrigued me. How might this perceived significance change if they were typed instead?

When communicating via digital means, typographic choice is the effective stand-in for the type of self-expression achieved through handwriting. But choosing a font implies that a conscious decision was made, rather than being an intrinsic, largely unchangeable, aspect of who we are. Furthermore, font choice is not only often unsupported by the communication programs we use, but so rife with stigma against gratuitous use that the decision to veer from the default is rarely seen.

The backlash against the CERN scientists who used the much maligned Comic-Sans in their presentation

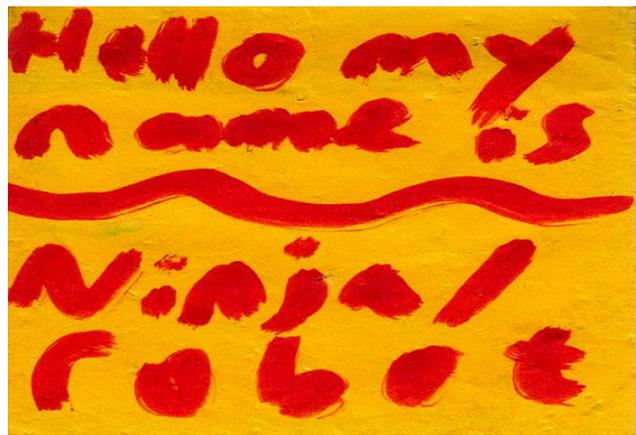
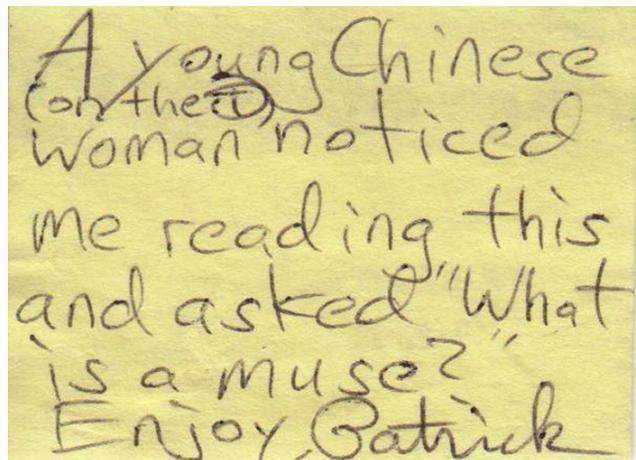


FIGURE 3:
A few favorites found examples of Post-its from the Anthro-posts project.

announcing the discovery of the Higgs boson “God Particle,”⁹ is an extreme but representative example of the strong cultural norms that await the amateur typographer (ironically, the World Wide Web was invented in 1989 by Tim-Berners Lee, also a CERN scientist¹⁰). The critical reaction appeared primarily on Facebook and Twitter, two platforms that disallow font control, and was so strong that it overshadowed the quantum physics breakthrough. MySpace’s embrace of customizability via limited HTML support, which included the ability to specify custom fonts, is often cited as the Achilles heel that led to its much-publicized downfall¹¹. Even if the ability to select a custom font was more prevalent in digital communication, it is infinitely less variable and revealing, and a mere approximation of handwriting’s intrinsic ability to convey personality and aura.

The reduction of an individual’s style of writing to font choice is not the only notable difference between the written and typed word. In addition to handwriting’s implicit support for style, the act of “posting” on paper also retains the decision of placement. Given a square piece of paper, for example, why do some confine their scribbles to a corner? While we may never know the answer, spatial charts such as the Bagua diagram (FIGURE 4) used by Feng Shui practitioners to map aspirational qualities to quadrants of a room comes to mind. Perhaps, a similar compartmentalization belies the Post-it that maps meaning to where we write when we do.

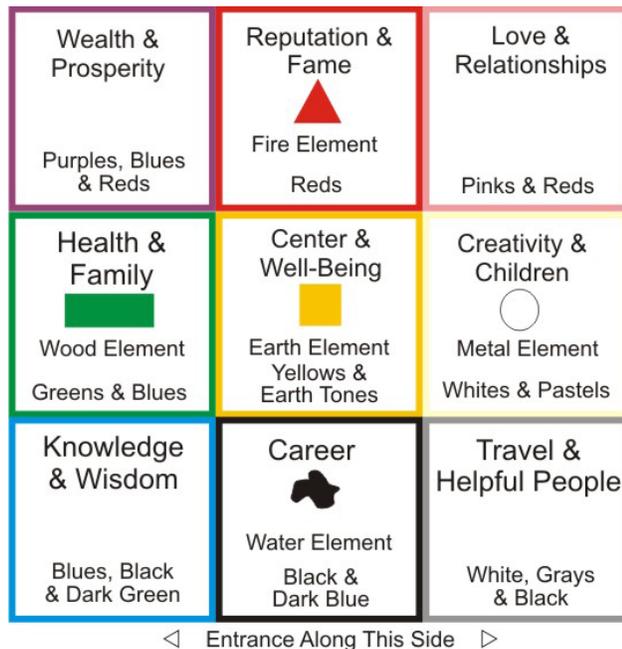


FIGURE 4: Example of a Bagua diagram.

FRAGMENTATION

Beyond the beauty of handwriting, the notion that compelled me, as much if not more, was that of fragmentation.

Life, for many of us in the western world, has become quite fragmented. We surf the Web with great speed, reading 20-28% of a web site’s content on average.¹²

Multitasking—a term first used to describe a computer’s ability to churn multiple processes at once—has become second nature. In each of these Post-its was a fragment of some stranger’s day, a meeting, a trip to the grocery store, a note left for a friend. And then, in hurried pursuit of the next fragment, it was discarded.

As artifacts tied to discrete life events such as these, Post-its inherently maintain a distinct ephemerality, subject to life’s frenetic pace in coming as in passing. Somehow, as I found, a surprising number of them end up on the street. Perhaps, the latent decision to properly dispose of a Post-it is “written over” in some cases by the process of encoding an incoming, higher-priority thought. Here, another compelling parallel emerges: that of the Post-it as scratch disk.

In computing, a scratch disk is an area used for storing data temporarily when the RAM is full or approaching capacity. Photoshop, for example, uses the scratch disk for resource-heavy operations, and frequent users of the program are likely familiar with the “scratch disk is full” alert. Many use Post-its this way— committing a piece of information to paper and diverting it from the responsibilities of the brain in the process. Consciously or not, this rerouting alleviates pressure placed on our mental faculties to remember, and safeguards against the accidental overwrite.

The timespan between the time a Post-it is encoded and decoded (via disposal) is generally quite short, and the trajectory they follow is often a transitory one. Against a backdrop of privacy concerns and big data, we are in the midst of seeing tweens and younger users promote ephemerality as a core value framing their desires for digital communication. Though social media has traditionally cultivated the virtual soapbox in which one’s posts and commentary is maintained in perpetuity, the enormous success of Snapchat, in contrast, marks a trend towards platforms predicated on private, self-implosion posts. “For a generation whose every move has been chronicled—either by themselves or by someone else—in full public view, what better solution than photos that self-destruct?” questions Matt Ingram in *Snapchat and Our Never-ending Quest for Impermanence*.¹³ Facebook, before making an unrequited offer to buy Snapchat for \$3 billion, released a mobile app called Poke that

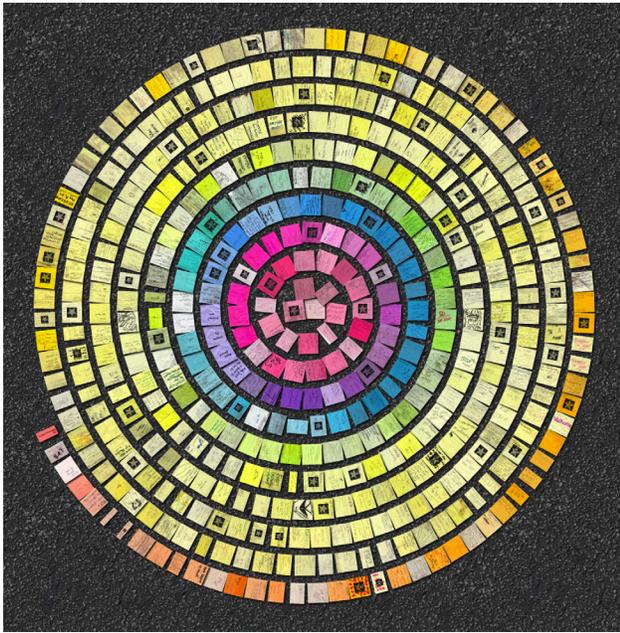


FIGURE 5: *The Post-its in the Anthroposts collection here shown, organized by color.*

substantiates the trend by featuring content that expires after one to ten seconds. Secret, Whisper and Backdoor (famously created by a 14-year old) are a few of the other contenders in this space. Championing the temporary and ephemeral, these messaging platforms subvert the old model by disposing of the fragments that pass through them by rule instead of exception. “I think they are part of a much larger phenomenon: namely, an almost unspoken desire for impermanence—in retaliation for the way that most of our online behavior seems destined to follow us around for the rest of our lives.”¹⁴

ANTHROPOSTS

As the found notes kept accumulating, the project I had envisioned began to take shape. Towards the end of my stay in Argentina I began building what would become *Anthroposts*,¹⁵ and the project was released in February 2010 after moving to New York City.

Initially, the notes appear scattered randomly against a pavement-like background, mimicking the experience of encountering them on the street. Summarized by Aviva Rotstein in *Re-Collections: Auratic Encounters with Database and Archival Artworks*, “the Post-it notes are shown from a bird’s eye view, scattered over the original concrete backdrop. Except for the background and the hand-scrawled detail on the found notes themselves, the graphic style draws from the vivid colour scheme

of Post-it notes—yellow, lime green, bright purple, neon orange—plus black and white. Hand-drawn materials and textures juxtapose flat computer generated colour. Complementing this visual contrast is the typeface: a sans-serif with both rounded corners and tall thin rectangular proportions.”¹⁶

The project allows users to organize the found Post-its by textual commonality, color, and complexity. Common Words organizes the notes radially, with arced edges connecting those that share at least one word or phrase; Color, though self-explanatory, is derived by averaging every pixel in the underlying image (see FIGURE 5); and finally, Complexity organizes the notes by the number of characters they contain.

An unexpected but defining aspect of Anthroposts became sound. Using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, a platform for outsourcing tasks requiring human intelligence, I collected a bevy of audio files of workers reading notes of their choosing. Upon visiting the site, these clips play randomly over one another in the background resulting in a jumbled sound montage evocative of the aforementioned fragmentation I found the notes to represent. “The soundtrack follows a pattern of deliberate juxtaposition... like a car radio with multiple frequencies filtering in at once.”¹⁷ With the indirect participation of the note writers comprising a first “layer” of participation, my own involvement resulting in a second, and the users comprising a third, the Mechanical Turk workers introduced a fourth layer that further enriched the chord of anonymous community that ended up defining the project.

CONCLUSION

The last Post-it I uploaded to Anthroposts was found on September 20, 2011. The process I adopted was a time-consuming one, requiring me to scan the notes at high-resolution, resize them, and save them before uploading them to the site along with their accompanying metadata. Perhaps, due to the fragmentation of my own life, the process proved to be too time-consuming to keep up with.

Nevertheless, I firmly believe that the Post-it bridges the pre- and post-digital ages in a way that no other cultural object can. Because of my intimate involvement with Anthroposts and the events that led to its creation, I’ve admittedly given this notion an inordinate amount of thought. And though the reader may object to such a statement or disagree with the notion of the paper pixel entirely, perhaps consensus can be found in a renewed appreciation for the role of good design beyond aesthetics alone.

For many, the thinking that informs the look and feel of the applications we use isn't given much thought. But upon doing so we see that designers do an admirable job of crafting experiences that honor our offline tendencies. Though we may not be free to manipulate and remix the posts that appear in our social media feeds, we are unconsciously reassured by the ordered structure that frames them. Perhaps, it is the constancy with which we have come to expect this structure that excuses the sometimes-fragmented nature of the content it so dutifully frames.

Finally, this examination holds something we've known but forgotten: that transience is beauty, and beauty is transient. When we stand in its awe, part of what drives that feeling is the rarity with which it flashes before us. This is not to say that beauty is or should be a goal of digital communication, rather, whether arrived at through privacy concerns or otherwise, there is something redeeming in its embrace of that which is ephemeral and fleeting.

Just like many lamented the decline of the oral tradition when Gutenberg invented the press, we must be careful not to let nostalgia cloud the forward march of innovation. Spoken, written, or typed, communication will always maintain an aspect of aura. Let's hope we don't forget to pay it a little mind.

BIOGRAPHY

Noah Pedrini is a multimedia artist interested in exploring the self and society from a technocultural perspective. Heavily grounded in data, both publicly available and personally collected, his projects investigate identity, isolation, and privacy in the connected age. His web installations have been exhibited internationally and used in course materials for the Maryland Institute of Art and UNC Chapel Hill. Recently, he has collaborated on a number of projects with David Patman focusing on the collective unconscious and dreaming. He currently lives in New York where he works as a Senior Software Engineer at the Parsons Institute for Information Mapping.

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