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A DISCUSSION ON AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION: HOW MUSEUMS CONVEY KNOWLEDGE AND HOW THIS AFFECTS THE PERCEPTION OF AUTHENTICITY

INTRODUCING THE UNDERLYING INITIAL THOUGHTS

The desire for »authentic« experiences drives a number of discussions in research literature as well as in museums' report about their practices, for example on whether or not objects are authentic, on authentic brands[1], and on the importance of authenticity for the tourism sector[2]. In this context, museums themselves are objects of research regarding their ability to provide such experiences and to present »authentic« knowledge with historical objects and (partly) at historical sites. Moreover, authenticity is one of several known motivational factors for visiting a museum[3]. Besides authenticity as a motivational factor, J. H. Falk, T. Moussouri and D. Coulson name six further dimensions of motivation for visiting a museum[4]: place, education, life cycle, social event, entertainment, and practical issues, and C. Goulding also names the desire for existential, aesthetic or social interaction as motivational for museum audiences[5].

However, if authenticity is such a crucial factor in the audiences' interactions and for their motivation, how can it be managed beyond the walls of a museum when knowledge is disseminated, in the absence of the physical experience of objects and the museum itself?[6]

The dissemination of knowledge requires communication, which per se is a social interaction and as such relates to the given motivational factors for audiences interacting with museums. Disseminating knowledge purposefully is a process museums pursue in order to provide education and therefore it is worth to take into account which management activities are necessary in order to do so. Thus, I aim to shed light on the external communication activities of museums used to disseminate knowledge and how these relate to authenticity. As the motivational factors for visiting museums show, social, educational, and entertaining dimensions are involved. These factors relate to the interaction between a museum and its audiences in general as well as they may affect the museums' digital communication and thus reach beyond physical presence at the site. Thus, this article aims at collecting aspects that might answer the question: What are relevant factors for managing communication in order to create »authentic« knowledge dissemination?

Museums are knowledge-based organisations that use their entire infrastructure to generate, preserve and distribute the artefacts of, and knowledge about, the tangible and intangible heritage of humankind. While the tangible heritage in the form of artefacts can be physically visible in the museums for visitors to behold, conveying intangible heritage in the form of knowledge requires a more complex process. Museums have a mandate to educate society, so they must use different ways of dissemination approaches in order to make different kinds of knowledge accessible and intelligible to various audiences and thus enable them to learn[7], approaches which nowadays also increasingly include digital communication channels. Thus, in this paper I mainly draw on this central aspect of disseminating knowledge and less on advertising activities, which could also be defined as external communication activities.

I follow the argument of Hede and colleagues, who point out the importance of communicating knowledge for perceived authenticity: »[…] a museum's authenticity is judged on whether it fulfils its expository role –

i. e. to what extent it develops and shares knowledge with visitors in a truthful and open manner«[8]. The paper therefore begins with a discussion of the relationship between communication and authenticity in the museum context. Secondly, it takes into account the different processes of disseminating knowledge. A central aspect in this regard is the question of the role the audiences' perception plays for the results of communication processes and in what instances knowledge provided by the museum might be considered as authentic. Thirdly, the paper looks at the »how« of disseminating knowledge to external audience groups, i. e. at the communication channels. I take into account digital communication channels that expand the external interaction to a broader audience and enable time-displaced and location-independent communicative interaction. I combine insights from media science, communication science, museum studies, constructivism theory, and from communication between experts and non-professionals in order to shed light on these points from different perspectives.

While there is an extensive discussion on what authenticity is, how it develops, how it relates to objects, and its overall importance in the context of museums, there has not been a comparable extensive discussion on the role of authenticity when it comes to one of the museum's core activities: dissemination of knowledge. Against this background, my aim is to open up the discussion on museums »authentically« disseminating knowledge by taking into account different perspectives.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

When discussing authenticity and the dissemination of knowledge, three main aspects appear to be crucial: The relationship between dissemination of knowledge and authenticity, second, the influence human perception in communicative exchanges, and third, new and digital ways of communication. The following section discusses these three aspects in detail.

Museums as context for knowledge dissemination and authenticity

First, there is still an ongoing discussion on whether authenticity is an »objectively identifiable property« or a »subjective, socially and individually constructed perception«[9]. In this paper, I suggest the latter, i. e. that »authenticity […] is not an absolute and constant quality inherent in an object or an experience; it is constructed in the process of research«[10]. A further approach distinguishes between object-based and existential authenticity, the latter being activity-based[11]. In keeping with these definitions, authenticity as a concept can result from an interaction and intrapersonal process in a given context and is hence socially constructed[12]. It thus closely relates to how audiences draw new knowledge from their communicative interaction with museums, which is the central aspect I focus on in this paper.

I refer to knowledge as the content of dissemination executed through communication between a museum and its audiences because educating society and providing knowledge are salient demands imposed on museums[13]. I further distinguish between information and knowledge in order to point out the importance of two distinct processes: First, of intrapersonal construction of knowledge and authenticity and, second, »the process of research«, which refers to gathering information. I pursue the idea that knowledge develops through the interaction of individuals in networks – and that its patterns are influenced by self-referential factors such as experiences[14] – and thus through how individual persons communicate. Consequently, I consider knowledge to be information (which in turn consists in semantically connected data) that is enriched with context, experiences, and expectations[15]. This process results in the construction of additional

knowledge and thus in learning, something which is a central objective of museums when interacting with audiences[16].

The circumstances under which communicating parties act as well as their individual intentions are factors that the literature discusses to be relevant for the conditions of authenticity perceived in communicative. For instance, there are doubts as to whether communication can be authentic as long as there is a strategic intent hidden behind the communicative interactions among individuals[17]. C. Fox states that »authentic communication occurs in a particular context, in a particular situation, with particular speech events. It occurs when those involved are acting with the intention of reaching an understanding«[18]. The author further points out that the participants who are communicating need to comprehend each other's norms in order to reach an understanding[19]; this is what I conceptualise as the context. K. Fritz, V. Schoenmueller and M. Bruhn found in support of this that the »perceived cultural fit«, i.e. the audience perceiving the brand as legitimate, is a »significant driver of the authentication process«[20]. Thus, in addition to the individual construction of authenticity, there appears to be a social dimension as well[21]. Aligning to norms is crucial in order for strategic measures of disseminating knowledge to effect their purpose[22].

As for external communications such as public relations, where stakeholders increasingly demand »greater transparency, openness, and responsibility« from an organisation[23], authenticity also provides »evidence of quality and differentiation of consumers«[24], and perceived continuity in changing and uncertain times[25]. This connects to the basic mandate of museums in terms of providing continuous and reliable access to knowledge and heritage[26], which thus should be part of their image. M. B. Beverland found for the creation of an authentic image of luxury goods that, among other things, linking the brand to the past and to cultural events ensures an authentic image[27]. This could be something for museums to utilise in order to increase their external perception of being authentic.

As the emphasis on the intrapersonal process and the interaction between the museums and its audiences shows, individuals play an important role in managing communication and dissemination processes purposefully.

Human perception in communication

Taking into account models of communication processes thus appears to be crucial. Whereas in former communication models it was assumed that information could be transferred without any loss of quality between the sender and the receiver, more recent models emphasise the recipient's active role and the importance of context, rendering the original sender-receiver models less important[28]. The human being as a crucial factor gains increasing importance when analysing communication and dissemination processes.

Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver developed a more complex model in the 1940s that highlighted the importance of the media used for dissemination. They depicted the role of media as ways of coding or decoding elements connected by a channel, which can suffer from interferences. Errors may occur while coding or decoding the information and this could cause the addressee/recipient of the dissemination process to interpret it incorrectly[29].

Even more recent models, such as Friedemann Schulz von Thun's[30], put more emphasis on the role of personal and individual conditions in communication processes. For instance, they include the content of the message as well as the relationship between the sender and the receiver, and the appeal the message contains. Such models also include the aspect of self-disclosure, referring to the sender's behaviour. This includes the motivation behind the intended result of the communication process. Both the communicator and the recipient have certain expectations in connection with the transaction.

These models reveal the impact of different factors on the communication itself and thus on the quality of the knowledge being disseminated. Whenever individuals are involved, constructivist communication theory[31] supposes them to be interpreting information when exposed to communicative transactions and using it to build new knowledge[32]. This emphasises the importance of the individual context, which has already been pointed out with respect to the construction of authenticity and the communication's effects on the audience. I refer to this perspective in keeping with T. Kolar and V. Zabkar, who argue that for managing authenticity, »conceiving authenticity as a *phenomenon per se* does not allow any possibility for managing (creating, presenting, communicating) it, so the constructivist position seems a managerially more adequate stance«[33]. Further, J. H. Falk and M. Storksdieck state that museum visits are »a complex phenomenon situated within a series of contexts«[34] which considerably influence communication results. I believe this to be true for the communicative interactions beyond the actual visit as well. Thus contextual factors such as aspects that are taken for granted, the individual perception of reality, and what is accepted as general knowledge have an impact on how authentic the audience perceives the disseminated content to be[35]. This discussion thus takes into account the cause that motivates the communicative exchange and the situation in which the dissemination takes place.

One further finds different initial situations for such communicative transactions. On the one hand, there is the communicating organisation, represented by museum personnel and including scholars, and on the other hand, we find a diverse audience that could be segmented into smaller audiences with different demands. As for disseminating knowledge, this refers to a communication between experts and (partly) non-professionals[36]. The extent to which different museum audiences perceive the knowledge presented by the experts as believable is therefore another relevant aspect[37]. Further, there are different levels of communicating actors: Either the museum as an entire organisation can be involved, or single employees representing it, whose behaviour depends also on their personal identification with their museum and who thus considerably drive the audience's authenticity perception[38].

Digital communication channels

This leads to the third and final aspect: authenticity within different communication channels. As illustrated by C. E. Shannon and W. Weaver's model, the choice of medium affects the result of a communication process. There are several forms of communicative interaction between the museum and its audiences via digital channels. These include external communication via reporting media channels, time-displaced and unidirectional communication via websites, and interpersonal communication between museum personnel and audiences in bidirectional, interactive channels such as emails, chats, and comments on blogs or social media. However, in all these processes, individuals are more or less directly involved in the communication. Due to such interactions, the audiences are not limited to being physically present but rather »[…] the notion of authenticity in this context has shifted somewhat from being focussed on the materials to also embracing the visitor as an active contributor to the overall experience«[39]. This raises the question of what impact the knowledge dissemination via digital channels has on the audiences' perception of authenticity. It is worth taking this aspect into account, as the use of technology is often considered in simplistic and rather deterministic terms[40] and there is no evidence of how »designing meaningful museum communication«[41]. When it comes to aspects of communication via digital channels such as instant messaging or time-displaced communication channels, these formats affect how recipients perceive the knowledge disseminated to them. For instance, J.-C. Molleda (2010) adds the dimension of time, which has changed with digital inventions: »What was authentic a decade ago may lack authenticity today; similarly, what was considered inauthentic before

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digital communication technology may now be considered original and a genuine and valued reproduction«[42].

Interactive communicative activities such as live chats with scholars have a different result to the reading of a text published on a website[43]. Moreover, reading a text on the museum's website may raise different expectations as to quality than finding a text now and again on the internet. The distance created by media between the communicator and the recipient may play a crucial role: While there may be the perception of proximity, time-displaced and indirect communication may lower the perceived involvement. The recipient's involvement governs the intensity of the communication: Communication initiated by an interested member of the public is likely to require a different process of exchange than a communicative transaction pushed by scholars or by a museum. A further influence on the perception of authenticity has been noted by K. Fritz, V. Schoenmueller and M. Bruhn, who interestingly found that a museum's brand »[…] signals that can be easily processed cognitively may be more persuasive for low-involvement consumers compared to high-involvement ones«[44].

The increasingly active role of museum audiences, who are nowadays »[…] active participants and do not merely observe exhibitions«[45] aligns with the opportunities digital communication channels provide. In this regard, the term »prosumer« has evolved to describe the shift from consumer-only audiences to audiences who are producer and consumer at the same time and whose interaction is not limited to receiving[46]. Instead, the audiences perceive their role in the communication process as being more powerful and allowing them to choose content and to control the flow of information[47].

Furthermore, the abilities of the individuals involved is crucial for the results of knowledge dissemination. While interpersonal analogue exchange depends on language, digital communication also requires technological capabilities on both sides. The extent to which recipients in particular are able to use digital media considerably affects the communication[48].

MANAGING »AUTHENTIC« COMMUNICATION

Based on the three aspects described above (the museum as context for knowledge dissemination, the role of the human perception in communication, and the influence digital and personal ways of communication on the perception of authenticity), I stress the importance of carefully differentiating between various types of communication processes for disseminating knowledge on different levels.

First, there is the process in which a museum acts as a mass medium, externally providing information to an unknown and diverse audience. Further, there is a more focused exchange with specific audiences. Last, knowledge dissemination takes place on an individual level when, for example, employees interact directly with enquiring individuals. These different levels of communication may affect the extent to which external persons consider the given information to be authentic and gain new knowledge from it.

Especially when regarding the museum as a mass medium, its external image and reputation are crucial to being acknowledged and trusted. In this regard, its branding strategy may have a considerable impact on whether external audiences perceive the content of communication, i.e. the information given and the knowledge generated from it, to be authentic. This leads to the questions: Which elements of the brand lead to perceived authenticity? How can they be conveyed in order to contribute to the authenticity of the museum's brand image? This also affects the managerial task of ensuring that this kind of authenticity aligns with the brand values the employees represent externally.

As for the interaction with segmented audiences or individuals, the anticipation of their needs and their situation may affect how they perceive the results of knowledge dissemination. This includes their individual
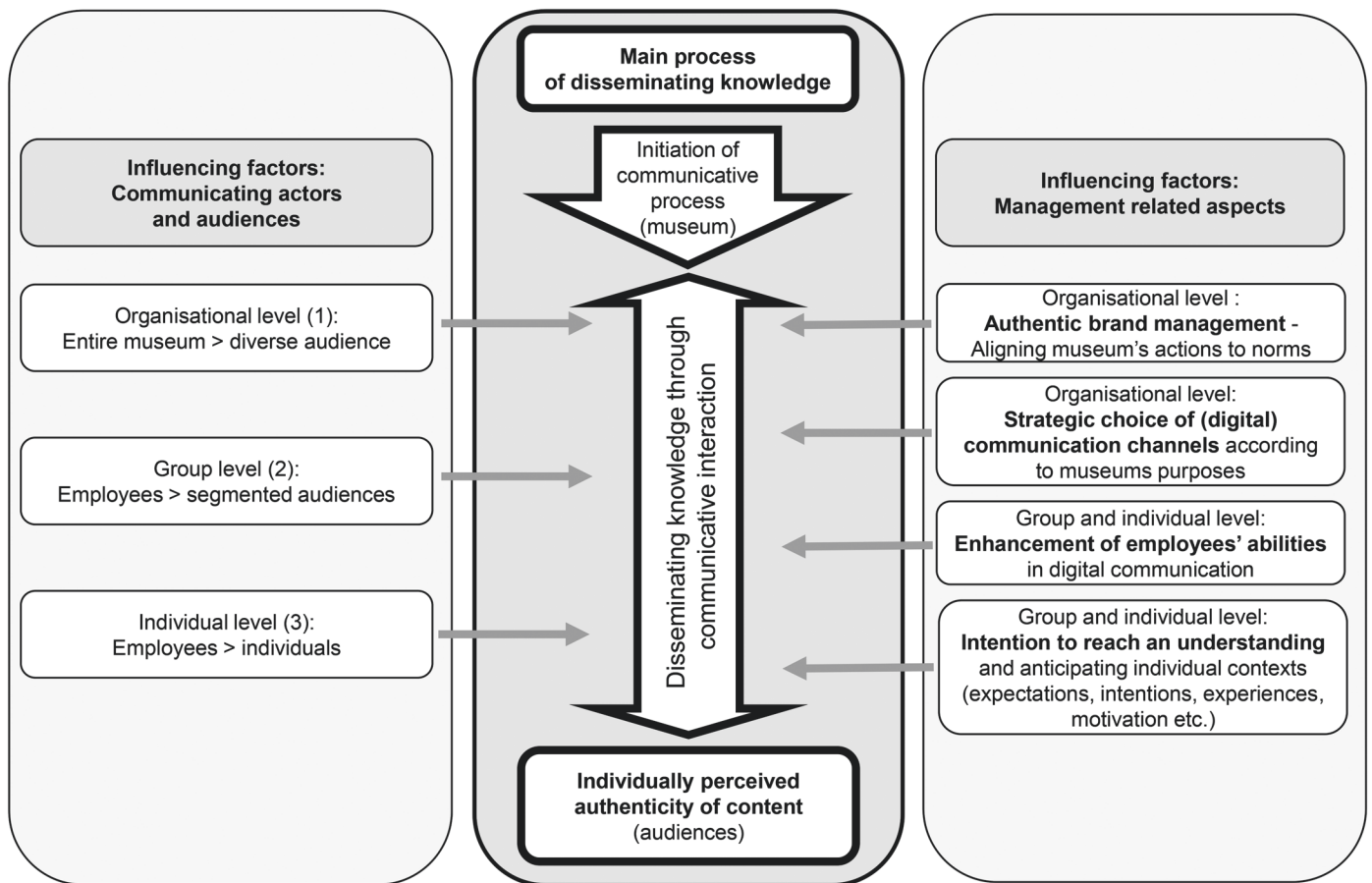
Fig. 1 Overview of the most important aspects for managing communication and the perception of knowledge. – (Illustration H. Brüning).

level of knowledge and their individual actual situation, i.e. what they perceive to be legitimate. This affects how a communication process needs to be structured in order to ensure the dissemination of knowledge. It results in a questioning of what defines the specific context of each audience so that the appropriate form of communication in terms of channel and content can be chosen. As for managing knowledge dissemination processes resulting in authentic perceptions, this implies the need for sound knowledge about the audiences the museum interacts with.

On the individual levels, aspects such as individual behaviour and communication abilities are of greater importance, and personal capabilities in using digital media may increase or decrease the intensity of communication. Hence, the initial situation of the recipient plays an important role as well as the factors influencing the communication process, as introduced with the communication models. I also believe it to be crucial to consider whether communication is initiated by the museum or by audiences in order to manage the communication process appropriately. While in the case of the former, more elements of attraction and thus anticipation of audiences' needs may be required on the part of the communicator, the latter might be based on audiences already having a relatively high level of interest. The level of interest may relate to changing perceptions in audiences considering themselves to be more active, i.e. not only consuming but interacting bidirectionally. In relation to this, I further point out that it is worthwhile considering how the roles of experts as communicators and (often) non-professionals as recipients affect the communication. However, the more informed people initially are, the more they seem to question something to be authentic

and need more evidence to be convinced. This in turn means that a transparently communicated process of how museum employees produce knowledge and why it is used, applied, and disseminated may strengthen the legitimacy and thus the perceived authenticity. Furthermore, the intentions behind the communication should be transparent in order to ensure perceived authenticity, something the museum could anchor in its general statements and integrate in all of its communication activities.

According to the communication models introduced above, it is also necessary to align the choice of communication media with the overall strategy, because every channel enables or hinders certain communication and should be aligned with the intentions pursued (**fig. 1**).

I claim that beyond the discussion of museum objects being historically authentic, the discussion on the authenticity of the dissemination of knowledge related to them is equally important in order to achieve an overall perception of authenticity. I especially stress the importance of such discussion regarding the increasing prevalence of digital communication in recent years, which is likely to affect whether or not authenticity is perceived externally. The discussion and the underlying profound suggestions I present in this paper are only a very first approach to touch on this topic, which experts from related fields of studies should further explore, incorporating their expertise on the various aspects I have pointed out.

As this discussion reveals, considering the managerial implications for structuring the communication and knowledge dissemination processes could enhance the perception of authenticity outside of the physical museum and thus contribute to its impact.

Notes

1) See for an overview Fritz/Schoenmueller/Bruhn 2017.

2) See e. g. Kolar/Zabkar 2010; Wang 1999.

3) See e. g. Goulding 2000.

4) Falk/Moussouri/Coulson 1998, 197-108.

5) Goulding 2000.

6) The central discussion in this paper relates to a research project and a doctoral thesis examining the use of digital content and the communication of knowledge in the eight Leibniz research museums in Germany. The project »NAVI for Research Museums – New Approaches to Valorization and Knowledge Dissemination« was funded by the Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung and ran from 2015 to 2018. It was divided into two subprojects, one of which was the subproject Culture conducted at the Deutsches Schifffahrtsmuseum in Bremerhaven. It is also the framework for a doctoral thesis on governing the communication of knowledge in research museums. Its approaches were presented at the conference »Museums – Places of Authenticity« – this needs to be stated here – and insights gained from the project are the basis for this discussion. The empirical findings are drawn from 42 interviews with experts in twelve museums and with experts from the culture and science community dealing primarily with digital transfer, valorisation, knowledge governance and the context of museums as institutions in the culture and museums sector. However, they also touched on the ways in which museums deal with expectations and perceptions when communicating externally. Although »authentic« knowledge dissemination was not the aspect I focused on, the data provided a basis for structuring thoughts on which aspects to consider when managing communication in order to indirectly influence the perception of knowledge.

7) Kirchberg 2005.

8) Hede et al. 2014, 1397; based on Bal 1996.

9) Brida/Tokarchuk 2011, 3. – Kolar/Zabkar 2010.

10) Fless et al. 2016, 481.

11) Wang 1999.

12) Peterson 2005.

13) ICOM 2007; 2013.

14) North 2011, 44, based on von Krogh/Roos 1996, 334.

15) North 2011.

16) Hooper-Greenhill 2004.

17) Fox 1997, based on Habermas' views on intercultural communication.

18) Fox 1997, 89.

19) Fox 1997.

20) Fritz/Schoenmueller/Bruhn 2017, 340.

21) Jones/Anand/Alvarez 2005. – Peterson 2005.

22) Molleda 2010.

23) Molleda 2010, 223.

24) Fritz/Schoenmueller/Bruhn 2017, 325.

25) Fritz/Schoenmueller/Bruhn 2017.

26) ICOM 2013.

27) Beverland 2005.

28) Mangold/Weibel/Woletz 2007.

29) E. g. Schützeichel 2012.

30) E. g. Röhner / Schütz 2012.

31) Developed since the 1970s, see e. g. Berger 2005.

32) E. g. Keller / Knoblauch / Reichertz 2013.

33) Kolar / Zabkar 2010, 653.

34) Falk / Storksdieck 2005, 745.

35) See for an extended discussion on the construction of reality and knowledge Berger / Luckmann / Plessner 2016.

36) See for such relations e. g. Bromme / Jucks / Rambow 2004.

37) See e. g. Bromme et al. 2015.

38) Fritz / Schoenmueller / Bruhn 2017.

39) Hede et al. 2014, 1397.

40) Olesen 2016.

41) Olesen 2016, 291.

42) Molleda 2010, 226.

43) Sundar et al. 2015.

44) Fritz / Schoenmueller / Bruhn 2017, 340.

45) Hede et al. 2014, 1397.

46) Serrano 2012. – Mangold / Weibel / Woletz 2007.

47) Sundar et al. 2015.

48) Sundar et al. 2015.

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Zusammenfassung / Summary

Authentisch kommunizieren: Wie Museen Wissen vermitteln und wie das die Wahrnehmung von Authentizität verändert

Der Beitrag befasst sich mit der Bedeutung von »Authentizität« in der Museumskommunikation. Insbesondere werden Diskussionsansätze dazu vorgeschlagen, worauf Museen achten sollten, um das in ihnen generierte Wissen »authentisch« zu kommunizieren. Die Autorin stellt einen konzeptionellen Ansatz zur Strukturierung der Aspekte vor, die das museale Kommunikationsmanagement beeinflussen, und diskutiert, welche Faktoren dazu führen, dass Museen aufgrund ihrer Kommunikation als authentisch wahrgenommen werden. Dabei werden drei zentrale Aspekte näher betrachtet: erstens das Museum als Kontext von Kommunikation und Authentizität, zweitens der Mensch als Einflussfaktor auf Kommunikationsprozesse und die Wahrnehmung von Authentizität sowie, drittens, die Auswirkungen von digitalen Kommunikationskanälen auf die wahrgenommene Authentizität. Der Beitrag wurde stimuliert durch Erkenntnisse aus einem BMBF-geförderten Forschungs- und Dissertationsprojekt der Autorin, das am Deutschen Schifffahrtsmuseum – Leibniz-Institut für Maritime Geschichte zur Wissenskommunikation und der Nutzung digitaler Inhalte im Transfer durchgeführt wurde.

A Discussion on Authentic Communication: How Museums Convey Knowledge and How this Affects the Perception of Authenticity

This paper contributes to the discussion on what authenticity means in the context of museums' communication and thus on how museums can disseminate their knowledge »authentically«. It builds on thoughts from a research and dissertation project based in the German Maritime Museum, a research museum of the Leibniz Association. The paper was stimulated by the projects' findings on governing the communication of knowledge and using content for digital transfer, and draws further on literature-based insights in order to open the discussion on the specific relationship between knowledge dissemination and perceived authenticity. Against this background, the paper focuses on museums' involvement in various communication processes on different levels addressing several stakeholder groups. It

aims to conceptually structure initial ideas on which aspects affect the management of museums' communication and which support the perception of a museum as »authentic«. I apply three main arguments: First, the basic relationship between knowledge dissemination and »authenticity«; second, the human influence on communication processes and the perception of authenticity; and last, the impact of digital communication channels. Finally, I sum up thoughts and insights in a model suggesting managerial implications for museum knowledge dissemination that seek to achieve the perception of authenticity. This paper thus raises questions that go beyond the authenticity of museum objects in order to stimulate further research in this area.