

# Voices on display: Handwriting, paper, and authenticity, from museums to social network sites

Convergence: The International  
Journal of Research into  
New Media Technologies  
2020, Vol. 26(5-6) 1315–1332  
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DOI: 10.1177/1354856519880141  
journals.sagepub.com/home/con



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## Abstract

The study examines the communicative functions that handwriting (mode) and paper (medium) have come to serve in increasingly digital and intermedial environments. The study begins in museums, where handwritten documents are profusely on display nowadays, and where the display affordances and communicative functions of handwriting are productively explored. Three curatorial display strategies are outlined. These are arranged chronologically, and range from traditional displays, where paper documents are presented inside glass cases, through artistic installations, where documents and handwriting are aesthetically simulated, to interactives, where the audiences/users themselves generate documents on-site. Exploring these strategies illuminates the concept of display as an agentic amalgamation of showing and telling, which produces authentic performances of voice-as-participation. These performances facilitate a move from private to public spheres – in museums and online. The study then proceeds to examine public displays of handwritten documents outside museums, specifically on social network sites. It asks whether and how conceptual sensitivities and sensibilities that originated in displays of handwritten artifacts in museums can shed light on the newer communicative functions of paper in digital environments. It also asks what are the intermedial consequences of the juxtaposition of analogue and digital surfaces. The study points at the current resurrection of handwriting and paper. It argues that the popularity of paper and handwriting results from their evolution into ubiquitous resources for display on and off the web, specifically as authentic bearers of voice that index human action and agency.

## Keywords

Authenticity, digital divide, discourse, handwriting, media theory, museums, paper, showing/telling, materiality

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## Handwriting and paper: A multimedial and interdisciplinary appreciation

This study explores the communicative functions that handwriting and paper have come to serve in increasingly digital and visual environments, shedding light on the current ‘centrality of the handwritten account’ (Hall, 2015: 230), and on its perfusion and multitude of forms. The study examines *displays* of handwritten documents in contemporary multimedia and intermedial environments, inquiring into the display function of paper, into what Gitelman (2015) calls documents’ ‘know-show’ properties. I pursue this examination by moving, empirically and conceptually, from displays of paper and handwriting in museums to those on the web: I firstly outline three widespread curatorial strategies of display of paper documents in museums, to then proceed to displays of the same in social media. I argue that paper (medium) and handwriting (mode) have come to serve nowadays as ubiquitous resources for display, defined as (i) amalgamations of showing and telling that, (ii) facilitate a move from private to public spheres, and thus (iii) produce authentic performances of voice and participation.

Examining current displays of paper and handwriting is an essentially interdisciplinary project that brings together three bodies of research and theorizing. Firstly, studies in media and communication, which deconstruct the notion of the ‘digital divide’, rejecting the dichotomy’s dramatic and revolutionary implications, and offering instead a more critical, nuanced, and evolutionary appreciation of *newer* and *older* media (Gershon and Bell, 2013; Gitelman, 2006, 2015; Lehman-Wilzig and Cohen-Avigdor, 2004; Manning and Gershon, 2014; Marvin, 1988; Peters, 2009; Poster and Mitchell, 2007). The terms ‘new’ and ‘old’ are parenthesized, and remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 1999), media renewability (Peters, 1999: 22), and media convergence (Jensen, 2010) are offered as new(er) concepts that address new(er) media environments. Deconstructing the new/old dichotomy draws on non-reductionist approaches to media in which focus is not exclusively set on this or that medium, thus avoiding “‘hard” definitions of old media as technologies and artifacts’ (Natale, 2016: 586).

For some media scholars, a distinctly historical perspective is the most effective approach to addressing the dynamic, political, and socially constructed discourses that set the ‘old’ against the ‘new’ (Acland, 2007; Natale, 2016). For others, the concepts of multimediality and intermediality are essential, supplying the fundamental condition of communication as such (‘ontological intermediality’, Schröter, 2011). According to this approach, ‘media always already exist in relation to other media’ (Schröter, 2011: 3) or as a representation of one medium through another (‘transformational intermediality’, Schröter, 2011, echoing McLuhan’s 1967 ideas). As Mitchell (1994: 5) once succinctly put it, ‘all media are mixed media’. I note the reflexive dimension of intermediality, that is, that intermedial relations are sometimes explicitly acknowledged by the users themselves, in which case these relations are indexed publicly and serve as semiotic resources for communication.

A second theoretical orientation that is helpful when looking into displays of handwriting and paper concerns mediated texts, and specifically *handwritten texts*. When the message is *not* seen as divorced from the medium, intermediality emerges as closely interrelated with intertextuality, defined as the reverberation of texts across spaces, temporalities, and platforms (Bauman, 2004; Briggs and Bauman, 1992). An intertextual appreciation demands that we incorporate knowledge and methods that pertain to understanding both the medium *and* the ‘message’. Intermediality and intertextuality help explain the communicative work that texts and documents accomplish both online and off-line (Campagna et al., 2012. See Ashton et al., 2017, for a Special Issue of

Convergence on digital writing). Analogue paper trails (Lynch, 1999) are replaced by multimedial hybrid trails, signaling the resurfacing of paper in digital environments, and with it the texts/messages it bears.

A third and last body of research concerns the field of museum studies. For scholars such as Bal (1996), Hooper-Greenhill (1994), Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998), and Macdonald (1998), museums are ‘high-density sites’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998: 7) that are productive to think with. Here is an expansion ‘from the specific, literalized definition to a broader, partly metaphorical use of the idea of “museum”’ (Bal, 1996: 1). With regard to media and communication, Bal (1996) observes that museums demand an interdisciplinary approach, which specifically appeals to ‘those interested in challenging the artificial boundaries between *media-based disciplines*’ (3, my emphasis). Macdonald (1998) adds that one of the ‘most productive theoretical developments [in museum studies] has been the analysis of museums as “texts” or as “media”’ (p. 3).

As a media and communication scholar who has been studying museums for the last decade and a half, I see these institutions as rich laboratories for the study and theorizing of newer and older media. My reasons are threefold. First, museums are essentially media institutions whose main function is to mediate that over which they have a charter (history, science, art, etc.). In fact, museums are fundamentally multimedial, employing a variety of mediational resources, which are increasingly digital (Light et al., 2016), in aim of conveying their narratives effectively. Second, museums are public institutions, and their mediation is aimed at the public. Museums have been formative in promoting and embodying (changing) notions of public spaces (Barrett, 2011), while raising questions as to the nature of the publics who occupy these spaces and who need to be educated and governed (Bennett, 1995).

Third, since their early-modern emergence, museums have been founded on the notions of time and materiality. On the notion of time, because time is what museums curate (emphatically history museums), where these institutions’ charter is precisely the *demarcation of the past*. Museums mark that which has passed, which is ‘old’, and which ‘belongs to’ and ‘speaks from’ the past. Media theorist Marvin (1988) points out that the history of how ‘new’ media ages and becomes ‘old’ is first and foremost a history of how it is considered as such, and Natale (2016) observes how media ‘operate in circuits of value where their attributes and qualities, including newness and oldness, are constantly renegotiated’ (p. 588). Museums are important cultural agents within these circuits of value, where the past is confirmed together with the powerful sentiments of authenticity and nostalgia. Museums are founded also on the notion of materiality, because they pursue mediation by means of material ‘things’, which range from the artifacts that compose their collections to the material designs of their exhibitions and buildings. In this regard museums are material – and materially demarcating – mediational institutions.

From museums I borrow the concept of *display*, with which I address communication that delivers the personal to the public. Display involves combinations of showing and telling, which are terms that refer to strategies of presenting narrative events (initially proposed in rhetoric, visual rhetoric, and literary studies. See Genette, 1980; Prelli, 2006; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002 [1983]). Telling is a diegetic, mediated literary mode, and showing is a mimetic, immediate, and direct – and dramatic – mode. The two are interlinked, as showing cannot be established without telling, and telling without showing results in uneventful and undramatic communication. In museum displays, telling and showing are ‘modes of exposition’ (Bal, 1996: 10): telling is typically conveyed by museum labels that supply information and explanation, while the presentation of the artifacts themselves, with their immediate material presence and aura of authenticity, corresponds to showing.<sup>1</sup> Showing establishes authenticity, as it contributes to the indexical value of the display. As Bal (1996: 7) argues

semiotically: 'display is based on indexicality: it points to what is actually present'. Jointly, telling and showing produce the *agency of display* (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998), bringing together the power to produce authentic collections and artifacts (showing) with the authority to frame them (telling). These, in turn, support credible communication that is part of the larger narratives that museums mediate and institute (Noy, 2015, in press). In museums and elsewhere, shifts between modes of showing and telling are often medial (as implied by the terms themselves), which further emphasizes the multimedial nature of museal mediation.

In what follows, I examine three examples from a large and new history museum in the United States, where displays of handwriting in analogue and hybrid (digital/analogue) media environments are offered, and where shifting materialities and communicative uses of paper are traced. These examples delineate three curatorial strategies that account for how handwriting and paper documents are used as resources for display. These strategies range from a more traditional approach, where 'old' paper artifacts are enclosed in display cases, through simulating (mimetic) installations where handwriting is displayed artistically on other materials and media, to interactive installations, where handwriting on 'new' paper (specifically here post-it notes) is introduced as a mode of expressing voice and public participation. I expand on the latter strategy, demonstrating how museums invite audiences to partake in the authoring of handwriting in situ. I use this strategy of display-cum-participation to bridge between multimedial environments in museums and on the web, to which I turn to examine two curatorial strategies of display of handwriting and paper in the Twittersphere.

## Handwriting on display: Remediating paper documents in museums

During the ethnographies I conducted in three history museums in the United States and Israel (2006–2019) – spending months observing and recording on-site museum–audience interactions – I did not have to be a media scholar or a discourse analyst to observe the perfusion of handwriting and paper documents on display. Indeed, these types of artifacts constituted the largest category of objects displayed (Noy, 2015, 2016, 2017). The museums' core exhibitions consisted of a plethora of textual artifacts made of paper, on which different combinations of handwriting (and sometimes print) were visible. These documents possess several advantages for museums, notably the *aura of authenticity* that is increasingly associated with handwriting and paper. Handwriting is seen in the West as a mode of communication that is bound to the author's body, indexing in this way the historical author herself (the absent author, as Derrida, 1978, would put it). Recall Heidegger's (1992 [1982]) passionate lament on the demise of the age of handwriting (with the emergence of typewriting):

The 'history' of the kinds of writing is one of the main reasons for the increasing destruction of the world. The latter [handwriting] no longer comes and goes by means of the writing hand, the properly acted hand . . . [rather] the typewriter tears writing from the essential realms of the hand, i.e. the realm of the word. (p. 81)

Scholars in anthropology and communication find that handwriting uniquely establishes 'a semiotic relation between a specific individual and a specific graphic form, produced, crucially, by an ostensibly inimitable biomechanical act' (Hull, 2003: 295). The important implication here concerns the relationship between authenticity and uniqueness, on the one hand, and voice (as indexically tied to an author), on the other. The perceived authenticity of handwritten documents and acts of handwriting essentially possesses a communicative value, namely that these

documents truly bear historical ‘voices’. These documents are not only authentic relics from the past but vehicles that carry voice through time and space (Innis, 1951).

## Site and method

The examples I discuss below are taken from my research at the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH), which is a large and new museum located in the historic and touristic quarter of Philadelphia. Originally established in 1976, the museum was comprehensively restructured in 2010, at which point considerations regarding interactive and participatory media were integral to the redesigning of its spaces, core exhibition, and audience interfaces. The NMAJH stands out in its newness, which a Washington Post columnist described as a ‘state-of-the-art museum-education-entertainment space’, that ‘feels decidedly like a product of the 21st century’ (Kennicott, 2010). The Post columnist further observed that the exhibitions ‘distressingly focus on ephemeral multimedia displays’ (Kennicott, 2010).

By the time I began researching the NMAJH (2011), I had studied two smaller history museums in the United States and Israel (Noy, 2015, 2017). Yet the NMAJH’s size, together with its enhanced use of newer technologies and interactive designs, drew my attention. My research at the NMAJH combines observations and analysis of discourse and focuses on changing museum media landscapes. This, in light of museums’ historic transformation from collection- and knowledge-centered institutions to audience- and experience-centered institutions (Carpentier, 2011; Lepik and Carpentier, 2013; Witcomb, 2006). The research includes observation and documentation of museum–audience interactions as they take place in the museum’s gallery/public spaces, and discourse analysis of the texts that audiences generate on-site. On-site observations and analysis of discourse are complemented by interviews with museum staff, who supply background information about the museum, their view of media and audiences, and, eventually, of the museum–audience interaction. Museum media ethnographies sensitize me to dimensions of handwriting on paper, and to questions of why it is that *now* they have become so extensively used in both analogue and digital displays in museums and elsewhere, on and off the web.

## Strategies of display

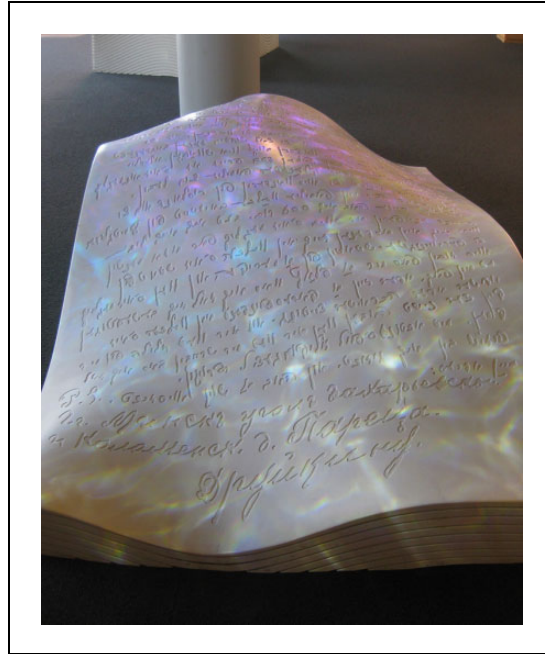
At the NMAJH, the numerous paper artifacts that constitute the core exhibition include handwritten documents composed between the 17th and 20th centuries by Jewish immigrants. Among these are letters, diaries, personal lists of possessions, religious documents, and business correspondences. Consider Estée Lauder’s executive planner, which is displayed in one of the last display cases audiences encounter on the museum’s first floor (lower half, Figure 1). The planner’s spread is open, revealing Lauder’s handwriting against the workweek grid of days and hours. Her handwritten entries attest to her use of the planner as a medium that manage times, places, and interactions. The hand-filled surfaces index Lauder’s embodied activities, with handwriting functioning as ‘a trace that signals its cause’ (Mitchell, 1986: 56). On a higher indexical order, these surfaces index not only Lauder’s industriousness and success, but also the successful absorption of hardworking and productive Jewish immigrants in the United States. A couple of Lauder’s perfumes are displayed as well, and audiences are encouraged to perceive an association between the textual and the non-textual artifacts: to establish a causal connection in which possessing the literacy of a businesswoman leads to economic success.



**Figure 1.** Handwriting on display: Estée Lauder's executive planner

The museum label reads: 'A peek into Estée Lauder's executive planner reveals the business meetings and personal appointments of one of America's prominent businesswomen'. The label fulfils the capacity of telling, which frames the showing (artifacts) by directing the audience's gaze and suggesting what the showing is about. The word 'peek' is key, because it establishes a particular *gaze or way of looking* – a suggested mode of visual consumption. Typically of museum artifacts, the planner was not initially intended for display, hence its showing positions audiences as voyeurs. The planner, which fulfilled its function in the 1980s, in its 'first life', now reappears and re-functions in its 'second life' as display that publicly indexes American Jewish history (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). The act of peeking emphasizes the distinction between the document's first life, which is private, and its second life, which is public, it also emphasizes the distinction between the celebrity ('prominent') who used it, and the lay museum audiences, who consume it.

The presentation of Lauder's planner illustrates a common traditional strategy of museum displays of handwritten documents: textual and non-textual artifacts are presented jointly, enclosed in the display case. They are framed as authentic historical artifacts by museum labels (telling), while signs of writing index an author (Lauder) and an activity or work (scheduling 'business



**Figure 2.** Installation: Yiddish sculpture.

meetings’). Multiple paper documents enclosed in glass cases index the past because they ‘come’ from it, as it were, and recursively, the past comes to be reconstructed as the bygone *Age of Paper* (as Müller’s, 2014, book is subtitled).

A second strategy of display of handwriting and paper involves installations and display surfaces that are intentionally designed as textual semblances, yet *lack* the actual materiality of paper. These simulating surfaces iconically mimic handwritten texts, thus marking a textual realm without supplying paper artifacts: an artistic and explicit case of remediation. In these installations, language (letters, words and sentences) serves as media and culture of the past, that is, ‘the obsolete, the outmoded, the dead, and the defunct’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1995: 369). This remediation strategy includes the use of newer technologies (those ‘ephemeral multimedia displays’ that Kennicott, 2010, noted above) embodied in a shift toward an immersive and aesthetic space where artifacts can be touched outside display cases.

Consider a Yiddish text that is engraved on a round, white plaster sculpture, which is laid out on the floor of an open area on the museum’s fourth floor (Figure 2). A shifting greenish light is projected from the ceiling, which, together with the sculpture’s curved shape, produces an impression of ocean waves. The installation references the prolonged transatlantic voyage that Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe around the turn of the 20th century had to endure on their way to America. The engraved handwritten Yiddish text (one of only a handful in the museum) is an excerpt from a letter sent by a Jewish immigrant in 1908. It is barely legible.

Indeed, this unclear text is not intended to be read. The visual and material effects present Yiddish as an ephemeral and obscure language (which can be sensed), rather than as the lively means of everyday communication and expression used by the majority of European Jews (which

can't be read). At the same time, the installation connotes the notion of 'writing in stone', which is distinctly biased toward being time-binding (Innis, 1951), and which accords with the museum's time-curating function. The reverberations of nostalgia are multiple, ranging from the immigrants' longings for their homeland, through their longing for the lost Yiddish language, to the reading, writing, and sending of paper letters – presented as the medium of the past. Sculpturing a hand-written Yiddish text is tantamount to an aesthetization and by-and-by museumization of a language that seemingly belongs to the past, where paper itself is not displayed any more but simulated.

Like display cases, installations make use of the museum's spatial and material resources, indexing the erudition and literacy of Jewish immigrants, as members of a writing culture/civilization. Yet if display cases embody the multiple divides between past/present, object/subject, and authentic/inauthentic, the textual installation performs more and less than that: more, because it is immersive and haptic, which are qualities that are associated with new media, and less, because there are no actual artifacts or object-based authenticity. Furthermore, the museum is no longer perceived as a mere 'messenger' of past voices, and the artist/sculpturer who sculpted the installation is acknowledged as an intermediator (over and above the hidden curator). This, in turn, implies a different sort of shift from private to public spheres: the handwritten letter is now a work of art, that is, an essentially public object (including a significant physical expansion, from a few square inches to a few square feet, which is also part of its making as a public display).

The move from authentic, aging paper-and-ink enclosed in display cases to artistic and aesthetic spatial simulations that remediate paper and handwriting helps to lend the museum its ephemeral and 'newish' aura. This aura's intermediality bears on which medium is marked as 'old' and which is not, on which is authentic and which is not. As resources for communication, paper and handwriting amount, again, to a substance of the past.

## **Audience-produced documents on display**

The third and last strategy of display of handwriting and paper involves incorporating *museum audiences' texts* into the museum display. This strategy presents further distancing from traditional modern displays in the shape of enclosed authentic historical documents, and even from mimetic installations. This interactive display strategy presents both an evolution and a break from what we saw hitherto: Audiences' texts are ostensibly not authored by historical figures and do not index history, and therefore the temporal frame shifts from the past to the present – the 'time of the visitor' (Blair and Michel, 2000: 47. I note that, while not historical in the common sense of the word, from the perspective of current audiences, texts written by earlier visitors nonetheless index past voices). Moreover, interaction requires access, and at stake here again is an installation – immersive, haptic, aesthetic, and inviting – and not an enclosed historical artifact to be peeked at. The spatial frame shifts as well, from elsewhere to 'here': handwritten artifacts are not imported/transported but produced (entextualized) on-site. Relatedly, unlike the scheduler and the letter, audiences' texts are public to begin with.

At the NMAJH, the main interactive installation is called the Contemporary Issues Forum (CIF) (Figure 3). This is a specially designated hall located strategically at the end of the core exhibition, through which visitors must pass on their way out. The CIF's location conjures up the typical position of museum visitor/comment books, suggesting yet another instance of historic intermedial relations. In its darkened space, four questions are brightly projected on to each wall (visible in Figure 3). These are yes/no questions that the museum's educational and curatorial teams compose with the aim of engaging audiences, more accurately 'museum-users' (Coffee, 2013), in contemporary public issues and debates (hence the installation's name). For instance, the two





**Figure 3.** Interactive: 'Join in and lend your voice!'

questions captured in Figure 3 are *Is there a connection between Morality and Religion?* (left) and *Does America have a responsibility to promote democracy abroad?* (right).

At the center of the CIF stands a large round table equipped with writing utensils and writing surfaces: black markers and large, colorful sticky notes. The latter are made of thick paper in colors (pink, yellow, and blue) that correspond to a word printed in bold at their top: *Yes*, *No*, and *Um*, respectively. The CIF is equipped with four scanners (one on each wall), where museum-users can scan their notes, which are then projected on to the walls (two such images are visible on the right-hand wall in Figure 3) and uploaded to the CIF's website (<http://cif.nmajh.org>). Users I observed employed these scanners frequently and were excited to see the greatly enlarged image of their handwritten note projected publicly on the wall.

Gitelman (2015: 21) details how documents are differently characterized by their 'fillability', and articulating one's choice and then filling in and signing the note, becomes an authorial technique. It is how institutional paper surfaces are framed as audiences' enduring 'voices', which are part of the public sphere. Keane (1999: 272) reminds us that 'voice is not a personal attribute', and that the production of 'a singular or monologic voice', which the CIF affords and displays, is a 'highly marked outcome of political effort rather than a natural or neutral condition'. At play are the close and necessary relation between display and publicness, because the agency of display is performative – it turns something perceived as initially inner, mental, and private into something material, observable, and public.

The museum frames the function of the CIF in a sign located at the entrance: 'History is filled with debate and discussions and those conversations continue to be relevant today. Join in and lend your voice!' The sign functions as a label (a mode of telling) that serves to tie the installation to the historical exhibit that museum-users have just completed visiting and explains its intended aim. It suggests that, through writing, museum-users, too, can now participate in the production and display of history. The museum display has turned outside-in, as it were: textual artifacts are now produced in situ by museum-users, and not by historical figures, or artists. The term 'voice' is key, because it references showing: it demarcates the communicative nature of this multimedial sphere, and it frames the actions that users can take as agentic social action, indexing political subjectivity

and personhood (Kunreuther, 2013). Furthermore, in this discursive configuration, voice is the currency that registers ordinary people's participation in the public sphere. Discussing the voices of ordinary citizens in the media, Montgomery (2001) argues that what counts as authentic is not fluency, authority, or eloquence, but rather the 'virtue of an unstudied naturalness of delivery' (p. 452). At the CIF, the visual qualities of users' handwritten responses, including orthography, misspellings, corrections, miscapitalizations, and spacing, are features that index embodied activity and spontaneity, thus qualifying the responses as 'authentic voices' (vox populi).

I have stressed the affordances associated with handwriting at the CIF. The printed Yes/No/Um responses are followed by a comma and a fillable (blank) space, and, despite the questions' yes/no syntax, everyone involved shares an understanding that responses are incomplete unless (*hand*)-*written articulation is produced*. Merely posting a blank note is short of showing, and, like an unsigned check, it does not qualify as adequate currency (fewer than 2% of the posted notes are blank or empty; Noy, 2017: 8). Restructured in 2010, the museum could have opted for newer writing technologies (touchscreens, tablets, and more), yet the staff members I spoke with were clear that, from the museum's viewpoint, *handwriting is indispensable*. They said it keeps audiences longer in the museum ('even a few more seconds') and is 'essential for visitors' experience [because it] creates a commitment on behalf of the visitors'.<sup>2</sup>

The three strategies I have outlined above mark a chronological trajectory of techniques and technologies of display, ranging from authoritative to participatory: from enclosed artifacts to immersive haptic installations; from object-based authenticity to authenticity that lies in interaction; from 'old' to 'new' paper (colorful and mobile paper chunks); and from artifacts unintended for display (whose display is their 'second life') to those that were prepared for and anticipated showing (whose display is their 'first life'). What remains constant are the modes of showing and telling (there are no artifacts without labels or labels without artifacts), and the centrality of handwriting and paper as markers of the past (first and second strategy) and of authenticity (all strategies).

Significantly, although in all the examples the artifacts are textual, in the first two strategies intertextual links between telling and showing are literally nonexistent. By this I mean that the label referring to Lauder's executive planner frames its content as 'business meetings and personal appointments', without reference to the actual luncheons and cocktails Lauder inscribed ('Opening. Princess Grace Dinner'). The same holds for the Yiddish letter. This changes dramatically in the interactive hall (CIF), where *most* of the user-generated texts *repeat* words that appear in the museum's questions (but not words in the sign at the entrance to the hall). For example, 84% of the responses to the question '*Is there a connection between Morality and Religion?*' (Figure 3) include words that appear in the question (typical responses include 'your religion has nothing to do with your morality' and 'morality is nurtured by religious practice, we need this more than ever'. Cf. Noy, 2017: 16). These intertextualities tightly interlink telling and showing, closing the gap between museum label (or question) and artifact, subject (narrator/ostensor) and object, museum and museum-users.

## Displaying handwriting in the Twittersphere: Voice and authenticity

Paper and handwriting are ubiquitously displayed and remediated nowadays not only in museums but also elsewhere, including, increasingly, in digital spheres (Gitelman, 2015; Hall, 2015; Levy, 2001; Shifman, 2018). I now proceed to address similarly short handwritten texts – ones that are displayed not by museum curators or museum-users but by Twitter-users: a tweet of a sign-holding meme and of a post-it note. The following two examples are cherry-picked and are offered as rich



**Figure 4.** Tweeted handwritten sign-holding

illustrations of how very short documents, which are assemblages of paper (medium) and handwriting (mode), migrate into and are displayed – assume performativity and agency – in digital environments.

As in museums, on the web, too, paper’s communicative affordances come into play: (i) paper as *surface*, shaping the visual quality of texts; (ii) paper’s ‘fillability’ (Gitelman, 2015: 21), or how it affords, allows and invites writing, and where and by which utensils; (iii) the mobility and portability of discrete/unbound pieces of paper, together with the texts they carry, allowing small chunks of information to circulate (unlike, say, sentences in a novel); and lastly, (iv) the aura of authenticity that the display of handwriting achieves, perceived as indexing a human actor and the notion of an individual ‘voice’. I specify that handwriting initially makes a public record of that which is unseen (thoughts, etc.), to then, via the materiality of paper, be displayed publicly, that is be framed as something personal that has made to occupy the public sphere.

### 1. ‘#Bring Back Our Girls’

Consider Michele Obama’s handwritten sign: ‘#Bring Back Our Girls’ (Figure 4). This photo was tweeted a few days after the launch of the online hashtag campaign calling for the release of some 276 Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram in April 2014. It was posted on Michelle Obama’s official Twitter account on May 8, 2014, with the label: ‘Our prayers are with the missing Nigerian girls and their families. It’s time to #BringBackOurGirls. -mo’. At the center of the image Obama’s upper body is visible: she is looking directly at the camera and holding up a sign displaying a short text that is and recognizably handwritten. The background is a hall in the White House (presumably).

As the tweet brings together forms of telling and showing, it constitutes Obama’s *performance of voice* in a digitally mediated environment and as part of a social/collective campaign (a ‘digital assembly’; Shifman, 2018). The function of the tweet’s text resembles that of a museum label: it is a telling that explains and contextualizes the image, which comprises the showing. In the image, the sign is held and presented by Obama herself, implying that she also wrote it. Although the

handwritten text conveys an individual voice – an individual’s voice, Obama’s – its content is intentionally neither singular nor unique. On the contrary, the text quotes the campaign’s indexing words/hashtag. The sign and the hashtag it includes do not serve as metadata but as a visual *quoting device*, signaling that the handwritten words are imported and re-entextualized into the tweet. While the quote performs a repetition, its reproduction is embodied – personalized and personified – by Obama, whose handwriting lends it its ‘naturalness of delivery’ (Montgomery, 2001: 452, and above). Hence the display’s authenticity. To repeat, while the sign’s text or ‘content’ is ostensibly not unique, handwriting grants it communicative authenticity and validity, which makes for a drama we may call the *drama of the authentic repeat*.

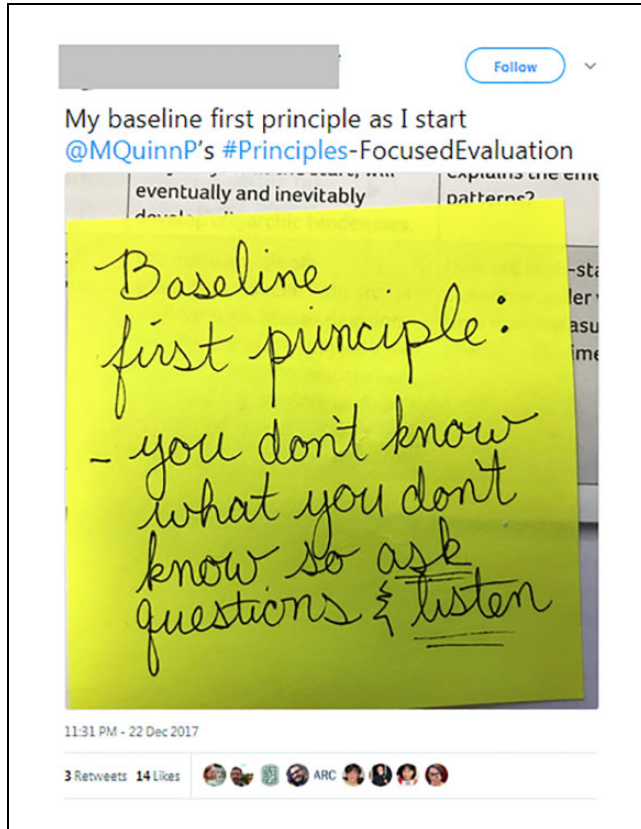
In displaying voice, Obama’s bodily gesture is typical of sign-holding memes, in which the body is still. Unlike demonstrations, where sign holders are constantly moving and interacting (with one another, the police, bystanders, media, etc.), the iconicity of sign-holding memes suggests holders are *not* moving or speaking. Rather, in this communication ritual it is the sign that ‘speaks’ for its holder, and, somewhat like a musician playing an instrument, Obama can be seen as *playing* the sign (the sign as an extension; McLuhan, 1967). The idea the sign indexes is that, unlike, say, the novel, signs and post-its are fundamentally collective: their texts needn’t and shouldn’t be long because they index an individual voice as part of an occasion of multiple/collective voicing. Following Bakhtin (1968), we can say that the sign is like a line from a novel, that helps to create a multi-authored and multi-sited polyphonous text.

Obama’s text-image has been retweeted extensively, with many variations in both the telling and the showing, from ‘#Bring Back Our Country’, held by a white conservative female Twitter-user, to ‘Your Husband Has Killed More Muslim Girls Than Boko Haram EVER Could #We Can’t Bring Back Our Dad’, held by a male Twitter-user with a darker complexion. While larger discourse and multimodal analyses are beyond the present scope (with specific reference to this meme see Chilwa and Ifukor, 2015), the overwhelming majority of these *reiterations* use the same intertextual/intermedial design: a tweet/text that functions like a label, and a handwritten sign with a short (inter)textual message, held by the sign-holder, who is conventionally viewed as the text’s author, animator and principal (according to Goffman’s, 1981, production format model). Like Lauder, Obama is famous, and although she wrote the sign with the intention of displaying it – it’s the sign’s ‘first life’, authenticity is nonetheless provided as we are afforded a ‘peek’ into her private life (her abode, body, and thoughts). Indeed, the authenticity that is associated with handwriting and sign-holding here, helps Obama ‘pass’ as a user; a lay user. The First Lady cuts cardboard, writes on it, and displays it like numerous other Tweeter users.

Authenticity is effectively performed here for another reason. In Shifman’s (2018) study of authenticity in digital memes which present handwriting, she offers the concept of ‘internal authenticity’. Internal authenticity redirects attention from an object-based quality to authenticity that emerges from an ‘internal association between a particular human being and their testimony’ (p. 178). The notion of ‘internal authenticity’, too, captures the ways in which handwriting and paper move between private and public spheres: authenticity lies in how Obama presents her testimony. Relatedly, while we see the sign, we imagine and infer the pre-posting activity of writing and preparing it.

## 2. ‘Baseline first principle’

The second example includes a post-it note uploaded in December, 2017 by a lay user (60 tweets and 262 followers, as of December, 2017), whose content concerns qualitative methods of



**Figure 5.** Tweeted handwritten post-it note

organizational learning skills and evaluation (Figure 5). The tweet, which has been retweeted 3 times and favorited 14 times, entails an observation that relates to ordinary users' everyday experiences. At the center of the showing, an iconic yellow post-it note is recognizable, together with a short verbal message written in cursive script with a black ballpoint pen: 'Baseline first principle: – you don't know what you don't know so ask questions & listen'.<sup>3</sup> In the background an open book is visible, presenting segments of printed texts that apparently illustrate the principles addressed by the tweet ('All forms of organization, regardless of how democratic they may be at the start...'). The tweet's caption (the telling) reads: 'My baseline first principle as I start @MQuinnP's #Principles-FocusedEvaluation', together with metadata (tagging, likes, retweets).

Like Obama's tweet, the image centrally includes a showing: handwriting on a single piece of paper, presented against a background. In Obama's tweet the background includes body and space/place, while here a printed document serves as background (the overlay of the note is reminiscent of marginalia, suggesting post-it notes as detachable/portable marginalia!). In both cases the figure-ground semiotics point at the function of handwriting, which is to *instantiate showing* instead of – or, better, in addition to – telling. Showing is delivered by the sign's text, and telling is delivered by the sign's context, namely caption and metadata. The handwritten text and the caption are intertextually linked, and thus a powerful intermedial and intertextual expression emerges. This

is in line with findings that show that Twitter-users typically preface retweeted texts with captions that precede, frame, and evaluate the quoted text (Gruber, 2017).

A closer look at the texts in these tweets reveals additional intertextual/intermedial relations whereby the modes of telling and showing are associated through repetitions (instances of 'format tying' in discourse analysis, where words are repeated between interactional turns. See Goodwin, 1990): the word 'girls' and the campaign's entire hashtag, in the first case, and the words 'baseline first principle', in the second case. Obama's handwriting embodies the crux of the campaign's collective message, and her tweet's caption supplies the telling: elaboration and explanation that frame the handwritten text and the sign-holding ritual itself as a prayer (an authentic and hopeful expression), which is performed collectively ('Our prayers'). The caption also specifies who the campaign's subjects are ('OurGirls' – the 'missing Nigerian girls and their families'), and frames the movement's hashtag as a directive (such as a command, request, etc. See Chiluya and Ifukor, 2015: 276). Sign-holders are themselves showing commitment (they are doing being committed), and in this sense the action performed is commissive, not only directive. In these ways, the caption *curates* the text-image inscribed on the sign. The caption concludes with Obama's signature, which is an authorial device that here also adds a personal touch (it is informal - mo, unlike her formal twitter handle: 'First Lady').

In the second tweet, too, handwriting constitutes the essence of showing: it is a demonstration of the implementation of instructions (specified in the print book), that is, the *actual product* of the learning process, or how *this user* observably practices qualitative evaluation methods. Interestingly, the tweet's caption refers to 'baseline first principle', yet the principle itself is revealed only inside the handwritten note (the caption leads to the text in the post-it note like a sentence-completion task). There, the nature of the 'baseline first principle' is conveyed and revealed in handwriting: 'you don't know what you don't know so ask questions & listen'. The point of the showing is that at stake is the personalized and embodied answer for *this specific individual* at a specific point in time. Unlike Obama's tweet, the handwritten note, it seems, was not initially intended to be uploaded/displayed. It was produced as part of a personal learning event, which the Twitter-user captured. Again, the act of display accomplishes a powerful shift from private to public, endowing the personal learning event with a sense of publicness.

Note that this tweet presents three types of mediated texts: the digital caption, and, inside the image, the printed page (background) and the handwritten text (foreground). These are three mediated textual chunks, assembled intermedially through three different media. As with Obama's political sign-holding, the orthographic qualities of the user's handwriting index her embodied and authentic voice, showing 'live' her learning process (i.e. the implementation of the research methods). Beyond its obvious handwritten quality, a number of other written resources are employed (underlining, a dash, indented lines).

In both of the tweets we saw, handwriting supplies resources for showing, and as such it delivers an embodied, authentic and 'fresh' expression (to paraphrase Goffman's notion of 'fresh talk' in the media. See Goffman, 1981: 242). These qualities are visually curated so as to index 'voice'. With specific regard to Twitter, the paper notes may echo the platform's own affordances, reminding us that only short texts can be posted/tweeted (even with the doubling of the number of characters). Hence Twitter itself can be seen as a platform that is based on posting digital post-its. More broadly, and along these lines, we can reverse the way we look at intermediality, and suggest not that documents are media, but that media are documents. Twitter, other social media sites, and the web more largely, can be fruitfully approached as digital surfaces, which, like paper, offer designed spaces that need – invite – completion and filling.

## Conclusions: The resurrection of handwriting and paper

Perhaps paradoxically, it is in light of its digital *reappearances* that paper's centuries-old materialities and affordances, and with them the cultural economy of handwriting, can now be revealingly appreciated. From historical documents enclosed in display cases, through open, haptic and immersive installations that simulate handwritten documents, to interactives that afford on-site production and digital circulation of handwritten documents, the current widespread uses of handwritten paper objects are a consequence of shifting *remediated* and (multi-)mediated contexts of display. This study examined display strategies of handwriting and paper in different inter-medial configurations, outlining how both have come to assume the role of *authenticating activities and surfaces of and for the display of voice and participation* in increasingly diverse institutional and mediational contexts. What makes paper documents and displays of handwriting so widespread in museums nowadays is precisely also what renders them attractive resources for digital productions and online performances.

The move I concluded in this research, from curated museum artifacts and spaces to curated digital surfaces and productions, is organic in the sense that museums themselves have been engaged in it for a while now. Studying museums offers sensibilities and sensitivities for observing how users digitally create and curate messages using the affordances that institutional platforms offer, namely the *visuality of showing* – importing artifacts into the Twitter collection, in combination with the mode of *telling* – and framing the artifacts on display. For museum curators, both paper and handwriting serve as relics: memorials of a medium that indexes the past. Paper has become a marked 'old' medium, and with the indexicality of handwriting it bestows authenticity and nostalgia. Yet this memorial is not the end point of paper's materialities, but part of its current digital resurrection in miscellaneous remediated forms of display. It confirms what we already know from centuries of the multi-functionality of paper products, namely that paper is 'omnipresent and indispensable in modern civilization' (Müller, 2014: ix).

Like the spaces that museums offer, digitally mediated surfaces and productions are public, visual, and meticulously curated. Both are institutionally produced spaces/surfaces that are designed to afford certain performances for and by their users. Gitelman (2015) characterizes paper documents by their salient visual attribute, which she calls their communicative 'know-show' function, but also by the fact that they invite writing, or their 'fillability'. Writing on paper is an embodied action or work: *paperwork*, which the written signs index, and which paper elicits, retains, circulates and displays (not necessarily in this order).

From studying museums, we also learn that paper documents constitute a special category of artifacts-on-display, seen as they are as authentic carriers of past voices. Curators know this, museum-users know this, and so do Twitter-users, as these groups combine handwriting and digital displays to perform voice authentically, or, to put it in broader terms, to convey the *eventfulness of communication*. In Goffman's (1981) terms, handwriting delivers 'fresh' expression, and increasingly so with the expansion of digital spheres. In light of the authentic aura that handwriting and paper deliver (recall Heidegger's rage at how the 'typewriter tears writing from the essential realms of the hand, i.e. the realm of the word'. Heidegger, 1982/1992: 81), the message that paper conveys has come to serve in *showing*, while the framing of the context – from museum labels to users' captions in social network sites – serves in *telling*.

Indeed, Hall (2015) and Shifman (2018) suggest that, in relation to authentic performances in digital and multimodal productions, there is more to the indexical value of handwriting as traces of action, and to the paper as marked 'old' media, than often realized. As in museums, in popular culture

and on social network sites, authenticity is (still) key, and handwriting indexes ‘internal authenticity’ because it facilitates a transaction between private and public spheres. In Shifman’s (2018: 181) words, it endows ‘the candid expression of individuals’ experiences, inner emotions, and judgement’ with a sense of publicness. This affordance, which allows audiences to ‘peek’ into private spaces, bodies and actions, offers a powerful mode of authenticity, which, in digital spheres, ‘asserts an indexical authority that digital texts cannot claim to the same degree’ (Hall, 2015: 4).

Two last notes. First, as modes of exposition, showing and telling bear communicative consequences. If telling is associated with partiality and showing with objectivity and a direct access to events – historical or current (Rabinowitz, 2005), then the latter implicates users, positioning them as witnesses (Peters, 2001; and in museums see Simon, 2014). Showing grants documents an evidentiary power, which means that their curators enjoy the authority of making defensible claims about reality. Second, and finally, as a mode of exposition, showing also embodies the bridging of online and offline spheres, demonstrating that ‘offline and online practices are seen as inextricably intertwined’ (Manning and Gershon, 2013: 108). Like other types of shared online materials that import everyday scenes to the web, displayed performances of handwriting bridge action on and off the web, digitally indexing everyday embodied practices, spaces, and times (Humphreys, 2018). In this way, paper documents in digital environments point at and perform the humanness of web actors, tracing – indexing, presencing – human agency.

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the generous comments offered by members of the Discourse Forum (Merchav Siach) of the Hebrew University’s Department of Communications and Journalism, to earlier segments of this paper, and to Convergence’s anonymous reviewers for significantly helping to improve the paper. Lastly, I thank the anonymized tweeter-user, for permission to use the tweet (and I send her wishes for full recovery).

### Notes

1. Museum artifacts actually make a strong case for mimesis, because they are often offered not as mimetic representations (reproductions, copies, etc.), but as the thing itself/the original.
2. Interviews with the Museum’s Director of Public Programs (February 14, 2014) and Chief Curator (November 7, 2014), respectively.
3. The underlined words were originally doubly underlined. The user granted permission to use the tweet.

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