



# Knowledge Transfer Strategy

By Dr. Sonja Hegasy<sup>1</sup>

Version: 07.01.2020

There is great public demand for knowledge about the modern Muslim world (1800 to the present). The pertinent basic research conducted at the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin provides such background knowledge necessary to understand current problems. The centre understands “knowledge transfer” as a target group-specific and dialogue-based form of scientific communication that conveys the results of research conducted at ZMO in a way accessible to non-experts, using non-academic language to provide society with new, research-based insights. The freedom to conduct basic research is an important public good. It can raise and anticipate questions that are not tied to political priorities.

The centre has followed the long-standing debate on knowledge transfer within the German Science Council and the Leibniz Association and has since early-on supported the German Science Council’s conviction that “the distinction between basic research, applied research and research-oriented service [...] [describes] not knowledge worlds of different value, but the non-distinct dimensions of scientific practice as a whole” (Drs. 1656-11, p. 12).

One of the central concerns of ZMO is to introduce different perspectives.<sup>2</sup> To accomplish this, our researchers use the methods of the *verstehende*, or interpretive, humanities and social sciences. The global research conducted at the institute highlights a diversity of voices and varying points of view: How are Germany and Europe seen from the outside? What topics do local debates revolve around? What arguments and contradictions are to be found on the ground? In this way, we place a substantive focus on presenting contextual meanings and insights into the motives and rationales of the actors with whom we are concerned. At the same time, the researchers also reflect upon their own position in this context. ZMO incorporates the knowledge of practitioners and opens up its understanding of classical, academia-bound knowledge production to include other forms in order to “promote dialogue between science and society” (Lentz 2018). The centre works with practitioners and multipliers in the field of knowledge transfer, including various media, public institutions, civil society actors and associations.

---

<sup>1</sup> With contributions from Svenja Becherer, Yasser Mehanna, Stefan Kirmse, Ulrike Freitag and Samuli Schielke. Reviewed 2018/19 by ZMO advisory board members Dr. Jörg Schumacher (head of communications, DLF) and Ronald Grätz (general secretary, ifa).

<sup>2</sup> This concept develops further the author’s strategy paper *De-konstruierende Öffentlichkeitsarbeit*, submitted in 2005 for the DFG Communicator Award.

## Relevance

Research-based knowledge transfer today has a central socio-political significance, especially with regard to the modern history of the Muslim world and its interconnectedness with Europe.

The results of the independent basic research conducted at ZMO on non-European history and culture are central to understanding contemporary conflicts. Modern and colonial pasts are closely linked and visible in current conflicts. Ignorance of these relationships leads to serious misperceptions in the public debate and makes mutual understanding difficult. Education about the range of modern Muslim lifeworlds across the globe is therefore necessary. The "headscarf debate" that has been going on in Germany for more than 25 years makes this clear, as does the increasing Islamophobia seen since the end of the Cold War. The centre can draw on extensive research that offers a differentiated view of Muslim lifeworlds. Research shows that the exclusion of Muslims from global modernity on the grounds that they are allegedly different, misogynous, mediaeval, and violent, misses the various and plural ways humans anywhere have encountered and reacted to modernity. ZMO draws on extensive research that offers a differentiated view of Muslim life worlds. Researchers at ZMO shed light on such historical developments, but often also comment on current conflicts and developments. The ZMO thus takes on an enlightening function in society.

With the establishment of "missions" in the upcoming European Union framework programme for research (FP9), the question of the societal value of basic research in the social sciences and humanities will once again gain in significance at the European level from 2021.

## Organisation and Resources

Our knowledge transfer is oriented both narrowly along the lines of the respective research projects and the further potential the researchers offer and, more broadly, in line with the long-term themes that ZMO is internationally renowned for (such as connections and transfer within the Muslim world and with Europe, non-European experiences with the First and Second World Wars, Muslims in Berlin/Brandenburg in the inter-war period, contemporary philosophy in Asia and Africa, and the global history of ideas).

Public relations and the media work of ZMO offer our research results for societal discussion in a variety of formats. Lengthy field research stays, sound language skills, and original local networks ensure the excellence of our research and offer the German and international publics new insights into historical and current political issues.<sup>3</sup> Complex relationships must be presented understandably, without trivialising them at the same time. To this end, the centre provides the researchers with trainings and support for targeted requests.

Beyond that, ZMO supports its researchers in publishing their results in regional languages.<sup>4</sup> This intentionally multi-lingual publication strategy is a trademark of ZMO in Germany. It is an important form of knowledge transfer in the sense of an international dialogue, while also offering the possibility for quality control via feedback on (intermediate) research results from local partners. This is accomplished via academic publications for communities of experts as well as in the form of contributions to newspapers, blogs, and other non-academic formats.

The internationality of ZMO makes an important contribution to its knowledge transfer efforts: Debates in Germany and Europe are simultaneously enriched but also questioned by systematically bringing in external perspectives, while important discussions are also connected to the academic and non-academic publics of the societies of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

The strategic development, just like the international networking, of the centre takes place with an eye toward knowledge transfer. As outlined at ZMO by Ronald Grätz, Secretary General of ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) and member of the institute's Advisory Board, "Modern research activity

---

<sup>3</sup> Our researchers clearly differentiate between their research-based insights and their personal opinions on current topics in all of their external communications.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to a variety of European languages, these currently especially include Arabic, Uzbek, Turkish, and Malay.

mustn't undervalue the dimension of networking and building synergies. Research institutions are always also brokers, curators, and platforms. The results of their research projects should flow into the agenda setting of other [organisations] (political, administrative, civil society)".

With the creation of a vice-directorship for 'research' and one for 'knowledge transfer', first in 2008 and once again in 2018, both areas constitute core missions of equal importance at the centre. Knowledge transfer, outreach, publications, the attainment of third-party funding, and international networking are included in this programme area, which includes four dedicated staff positions. Guest applications and third-party funded projects with practical transfer components are integrated at ZMO in a balanced relationship to basic research.

### **Societal and Political Consulting**

The ZMO reacts to current upheavals in the countries being researched and provides necessary expertise. Technical, academic, and student staff provide dialogue-based societal and political consulting in the form of public events, the receiving of delegations, through activities on various committees and advisory boards, as evaluators, and in consultations and advisory discussions. ZMO collaborates with the German political foundations on civic education.

### **Target Groups**

- Interested public
- Policy preparation level
- Politicians
- Media
- Cultural organisations
- Intermediary organisations
- Students
- At times, school pupils

### **Motivation and Quality Assurance**

The ZMO promotes knowledge transfer via its hiring policy with the following specifications and incentives:

- The responsibilities covered in job advertisements include knowledge transfer;
- Participating in transfer is one of the explicitly communicated performance criteria for permanent contracts;
- The value of popular scientific contributions is recognised by their reprinting in in-house publications (bulletin, newsletter, year book), possibly also via external high-level contributions;
- Provision of individual support in interactions with journalists and in preparation for interviews;
- Advanced training offers (e.g. "Media Training for Academics")
- Performance reviews via the reporting mechanism;
- Oversight and evaluation by the academic advisory board, which always has at least one member representing the area of knowledge transfer.

### **Measures (Output)**

ZMO employees and associates proactively utilise, in addition to their academic publications, popular scientific publications with large print-runs and open access formats (OA) to publicise the results of their work for as broad an impact as possible. The centre organises public events (talks, podium discussions, film series, exhibitions) for interested audiences with various cooperation partners and takes part in relevant Leibniz events (such as the "Leibniz im Bundestag"). It also offers background discussions for members of the Federal Foreign Office, the political foundations, and foreign correspondents. Since 2004, our research results have also been communicated on a regular basis in a

direct interplay with artistic positions.<sup>5</sup> Fellows and artists frequently come together to engage with their specific forms of knowledge production, speaking to an even larger audience than they would have reached alone. Since 2018, there has been a rise in the number of ethnographic films produced by ZMO researchers.

ZMO offers classical media work, i.e. press conferences, press releases, multi-lingual interviews for print media, radio and TV, author articles, original interviews, blogs, expert lists for current events, etc. The centre also communicates events and media reactions via social media. As part of its public work, ZMO additionally provides journalists with background information on request and assists in translations and fact checks when desired. Press articles, radio and TV contributions, and podcasts are made available online via the ZMO website. Talks can be streamed via the ZMO YouTube channel. Internships for students are also a part of knowledge transfer.

The ZMO newsletter is released on a monthly basis. The English-language *ZMO Orient Bulletin* is released digitally twice a year and is distributed to an international mailing list. It introduces new research topics and groups, as well as preliminary results of projects and relevant activities. In 2010, the ZMO's two open access series, *ZMO Programmatic Texts* (with user comment forums) and *ZMO Working Papers*, were introduced with the goal of reaching a wider (international) readership. The ZMO Annual Report includes in-depth reflections on selected research projects, and has been available in English and German since 2018.

The open access approach plays an important role for all ZMO publications. The contributions to open and limited access digital media are to increase within the framework of the ZMO knowledge transfer strategy. In pursuit of this goal, the institute supports the cost-free publishing and distribution of high-quality publications. As print publications are still afforded a special relevance in the humanities, the expansion of hybrid publication models and "green open access" will be promoted in the coming years. Due to the international orientation of ZMO, a further goal of this knowledge transfer strategy is to make research results accessible to locales with less well-developed research infrastructure via open access.

ZMO further works to strengthen authors' usage rights in relation to their publishers (e.g. by negotiating supplementary clauses that allow for the free continued use of texts in repositories or on websites, or by negotiating limited embargo periods) and in implementing secondary publishing rights in line with § 38 UrhG (German Copyright Law). Further support can be offered by expanding the issuing of CC BY licenses that allow for legally-guaranteed continued use. ZMO encourages its employees and associates to publish in prestigious OA publications. In cases of non-freely accessible open access publications, we determine the possibility and extent to which certain costs (e.g. article processing charges) can be covered by internal and external funding.

## **Evaluation (Impact)**

ZMO provides orienting knowledge that offers background, topics, and arguments for public discussion and policymaking. Instruments for quantitative evaluation are poorly suited for measuring the direct and indirect societal impacts of this type of knowledge. Socio-political changes are generally difficult to track without drifting into the realm of speculation. The question of "What exactly is impact? How can it be measured or even planned?"<sup>6</sup> is intensively discussed within the Leibniz Association as well. Swings in German public opinion (or for that matter, among individuals) can hardly be legitimately claimed to be the result of specific institutes. This also applies to the attitudes of specific target groups or individual decision-makers. Thus, in addition to presenting its work quantitatively, the ZMO seeks to present the impact of its knowledge transfer efforts in narrative<sup>7</sup> form: Who picked up on a topic

---

<sup>5</sup> For an overview, see: <https://www.zmo.de/pressekit/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the title of the May 2018 spring meeting of the Working Group on Knowledge Transfer of the Leibniz Association.

<sup>7</sup> This represents a period of 5 to 10 years and should not be confused with anecdotal evidence.

specific to the ZMO? What were the reactions? Where did interest in topics intensify following a specific input from the Centre?<sup>8</sup>

That the effort involved in measuring knowledge transfer should be far less than the effort involved in the actual work of knowledge transfer must not be overlooked, so as to avoid a counter-productive impact on resources. We therefore do not want to prepare some well-founded suggestion of our impact. When addressing the special expertise of ZMO, it would be dishonest to suggest that the discourse presenting the Muslim world as a “pre-modern society” and “Islam” as a static religion has decreased since the institute’s founding in 1996; the opposite is the case. It is precisely for this reason, however, that ZMO views offering its expertise to a broad public as its duty.

## Conclusion

In an era of filter bubbles and targeted disinformation campaigns, the need for evidence and the necessity of providing society with valid information on Muslim lifeworlds are increasing. With the renaissance of populist movements that can be observed worldwide at the start of the 21st century - the radical elements of which are explicitly attempting to drown (out) the democratic public discourse -, the struggle over the grand narrative and the ‘*Deutungshoheit*’ is on. The rising Islamophobia observed in this context contains elements of the anti-Semitic campaigns of the 19th and 20th centuries (see Benz, 2008). The traditional sources of insights, the universities and media houses, barely reach these groups anymore. To bring objectivity to the debate, ZMO seeks a change of perspectives via discussion and personal interaction.

The ZMO knowledge transfer strategy is underpinned by the fundamental idea: There is no ZMO topic too complex for transfer to the broader public; and no topic is a niche topic. Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient views itself as an institute with an important socio-political translation function. To this end, its employees and associates take part in a dialogue that continuously questions previously-attained knowledge.

## Literature

Benz, W.: Feindbild Islam und islamisierter Antisemitismus. Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung Nr. 17 (2008).

Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient: Open-Access-Policy. January 2018.

Lentz, Sebastian; Projektgruppe "Leitbild Wissenstransfer": Leitbild Wissenstransfer Leibniz-Gemeinschaft, 9 July 2018.

Nguyen, C.T.: Cognitive Islands and Runaway Echo Chambers: Problems for Epistemic Dependence on Experts. In: *Synthese. An International Journal for Epistemology, Methodology and Philosophy of Science* (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-018-1692-0>

---

<sup>8</sup> This applies, for example, to the research on translocality and to Muslims in Germany during the First and Second World Wars and the interwar period.