Frank Gnegel
Can We Get Rid of That?
Mass Deaccession of Collection Items

Disposal of collection items in a dumpster **| Telecommunications Collection of the Higher Postal Directorate Dusseldorf, 2001**

Sustainable Collecting: Curatorially Motivated Disposal

- Deaccessioning is essential for a sustainable collection management
- Collections containing objects no longer appropriate to the museum's mission are a burden for the future
- Deaccessioning is a way to develop and strengthen a collection
- Re-evaluating earlier accessioning decisions:
  - Identifying objects which would not be accepted today
  - Objects which should never have been collected

Attitudes Towards Deaccessioning Are Changing

- ICOM Code of Ethics: "…there must always be a strong presumption against the disposal of objects"
- AAM Code of Ethics: "Museums must remain free to improve their collection through selective disposal…"

- Problem for Museums of Technology:
  - Mass production society produces huge amount of potential museum objects
  - Not the one-of-a-kind artworks provide the most deaccessioning dilemmas
  - Main problem is bulk disposal of mass produced objects with a low financial value
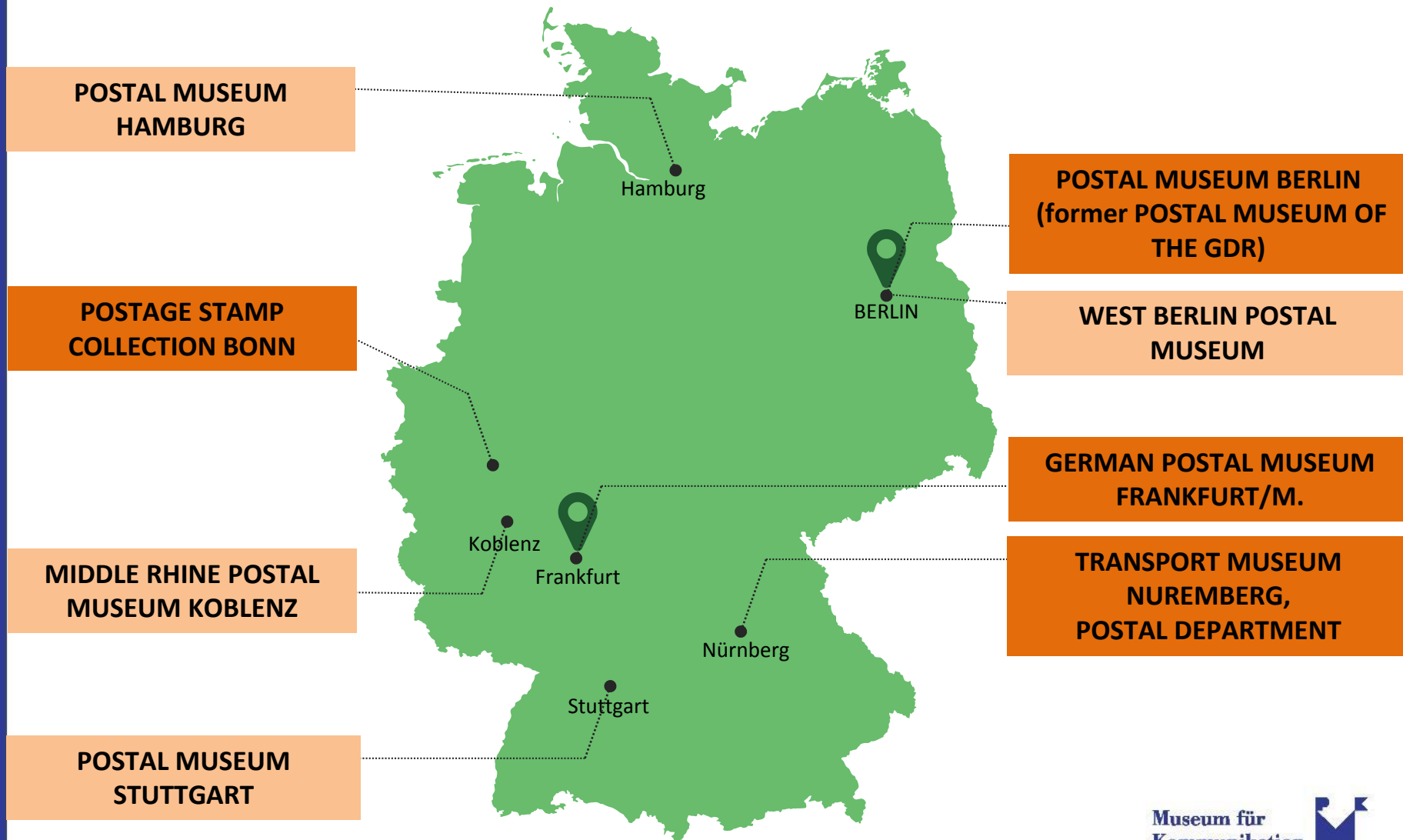
Museum für
Kommunikation
Frankfurt

Privatization of the Federal Mail in 1995:
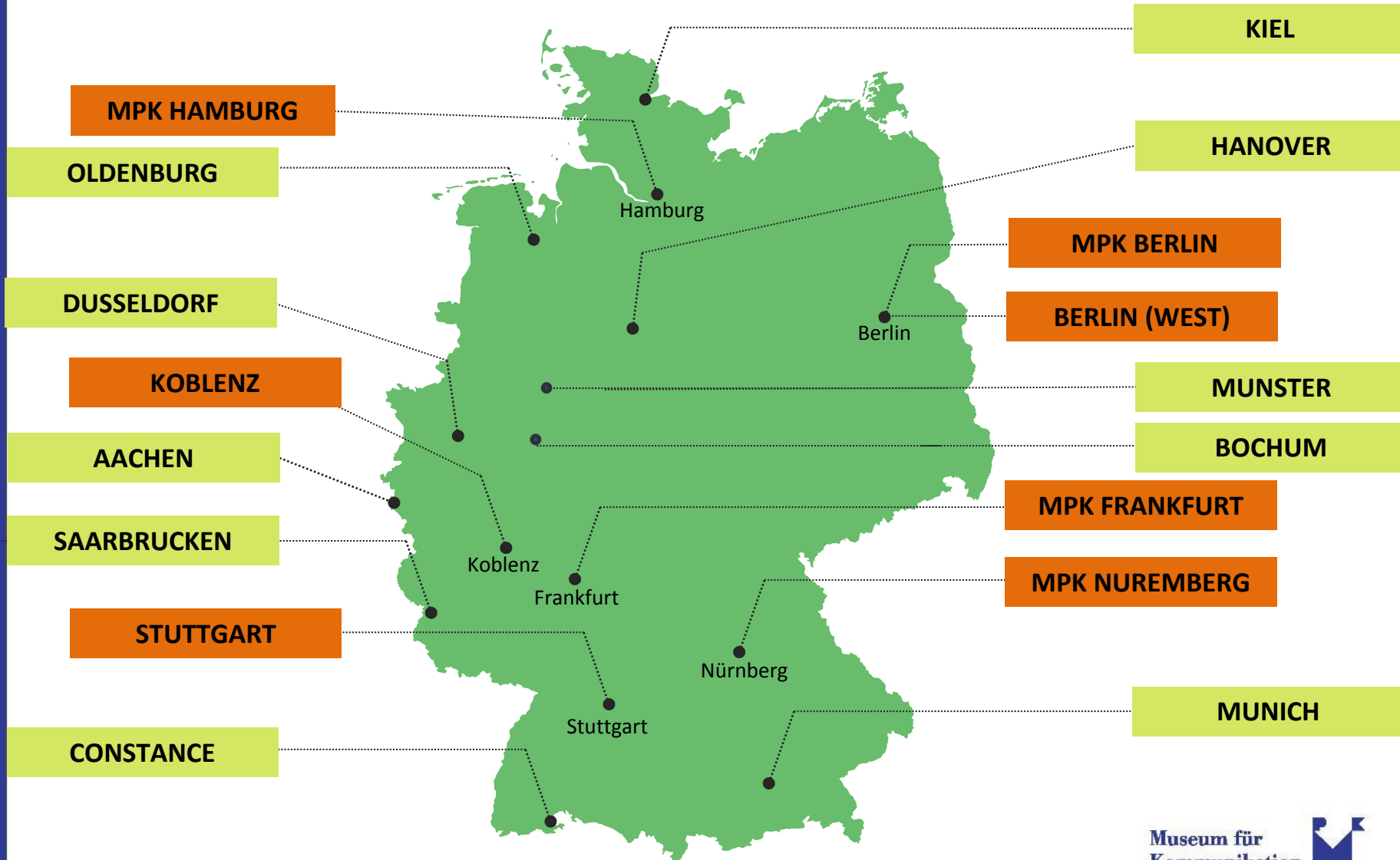## *Establishment of the Museum Foundation Post and Telecommunications (MSPT)*

- Privatization of German Federal Mail in 1995

- Museums converted into a foundation under public law

- Process of concentration among the postal museums started

- Until 2005, the collections of five postal museums and about 20 other postal collections had to be dissolved

- During ten years, several 10,000 objects had to be moved and several 1,000 objects had to be disposed

- Today, several 10,000 objects are still waiting to be reappraised

- Subsequently, many 1,000 objects still have to be deaccessioned

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Museum Foundation Post and Telecommunications
Museums Existing in 1995

POSTAL MUSEUM HAMBURG

POSTAGE STAMP COLLECTION BONN

MIDDLE RHINE POSTAL MUSEUM KOBLENZ

POSTAL MUSEUM STUTTGART

POSTAL MUSEUM BERLIN (former POSTAL MUSEUM OF THE GDR)

WEST BERLIN POSTAL MUSEUM

GERMAN POSTAL MUSEUM FRANKFURT/M.

TRANSPORT MUSEUM NUREMBERG, POSTAL DEPARTMENT

Hamburg

BERLIN

Koblenz

Frankfurt

Nürnberg

Stuttgart

Museum für Kommunikation Frankfurt

Museum Foundation Post and Telecommunications
Museums and Larger Collections in 1995

KIEL

MPK HAMBURG

OLDENBURG

HANOVER

MPK BERLIN

BERLIN (WEST)

DUSSELDORF

KOBLENZ

MUNSTER

AACHEN

BOCHUM

SAARBRUCKEN

MPK FRANKFURT

MPK NUREMBERG

STUTTGART

MUNICH

CONSTANCE

Hamburg
Berlin
Koblenz
Frankfurt
Nürnberg
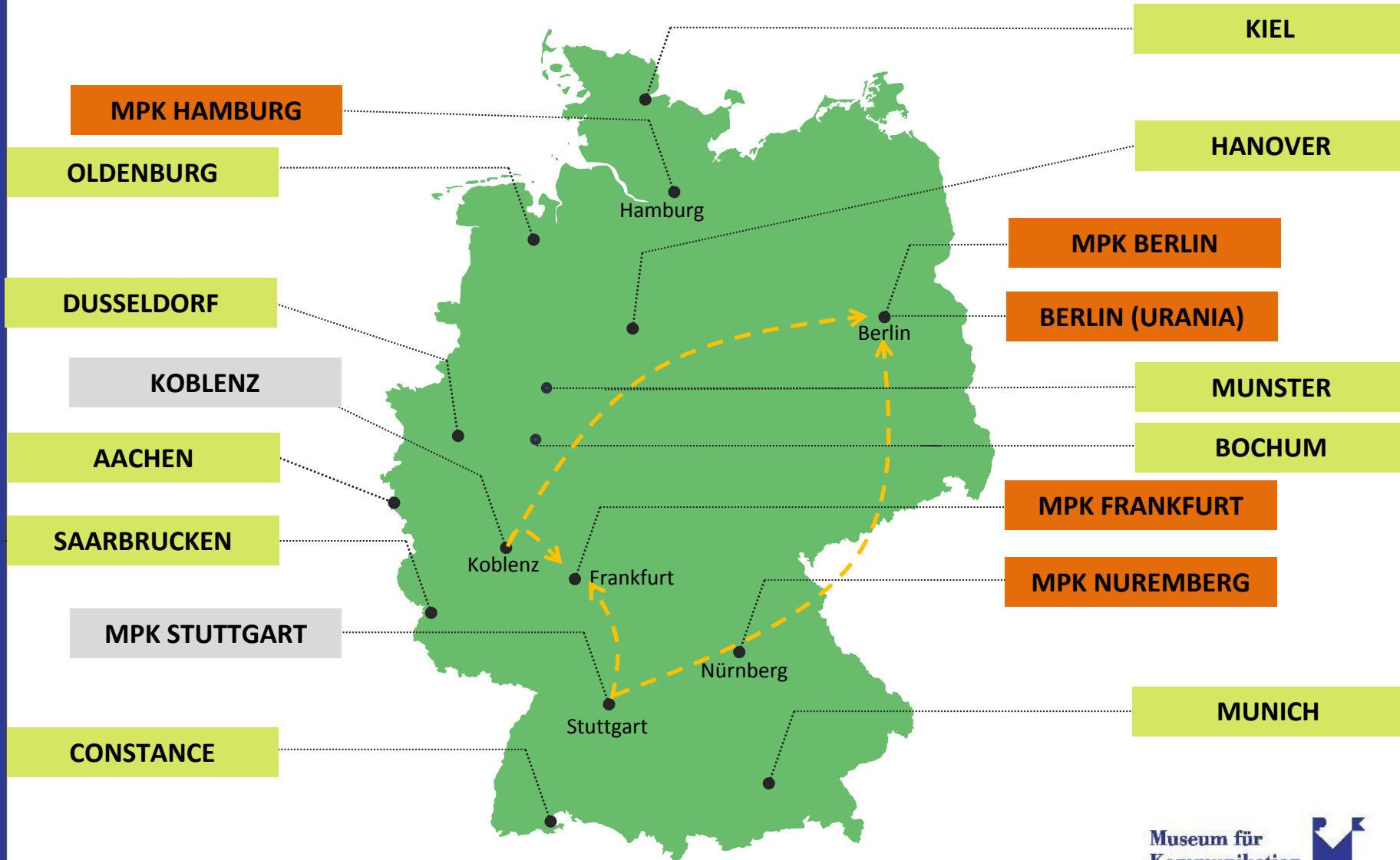Stuttgart

Museum für Kommunikation Frankfurt

Privatization of the Federal Mail in 1995:
Establishment of the Museum Foundation Post and Telecommunications (MSPT)

- Federal Act for Establishing a Museum Foundation Post and Telecommunications (PTStiftG) § 3:
  "All assets of the Federal Mail … which serve museum purposes (collection items, postage stamp archives and other property) shall be transferred to the Foundation"

- This definition included not only the then existing museums

- Theoretically, the Museum Foundation became legal owner of all historical objects within the former Federal Mail effective from January 1st, 1995

- Regardless of where they were located (in two now private companies with 40,000 buildings and properties and 600,000 employees)

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Closure of the Regional Museums 1995

KIEL

MPK HAMBURG

OLDENBURG

HANOVER

MPK BERLIN

DUSSELDORF

BERLIN (URANIA)

KOBLENZ

MUNSTER

AACHEN

BOCHUM

SAARBRUCKEN

MPK FRANKFURT

MPK STUTTGART

MPK NUREMBERG

MUNICH

CONSTANCE

Hamburg

Berlin

Koblenz

Frankfurt

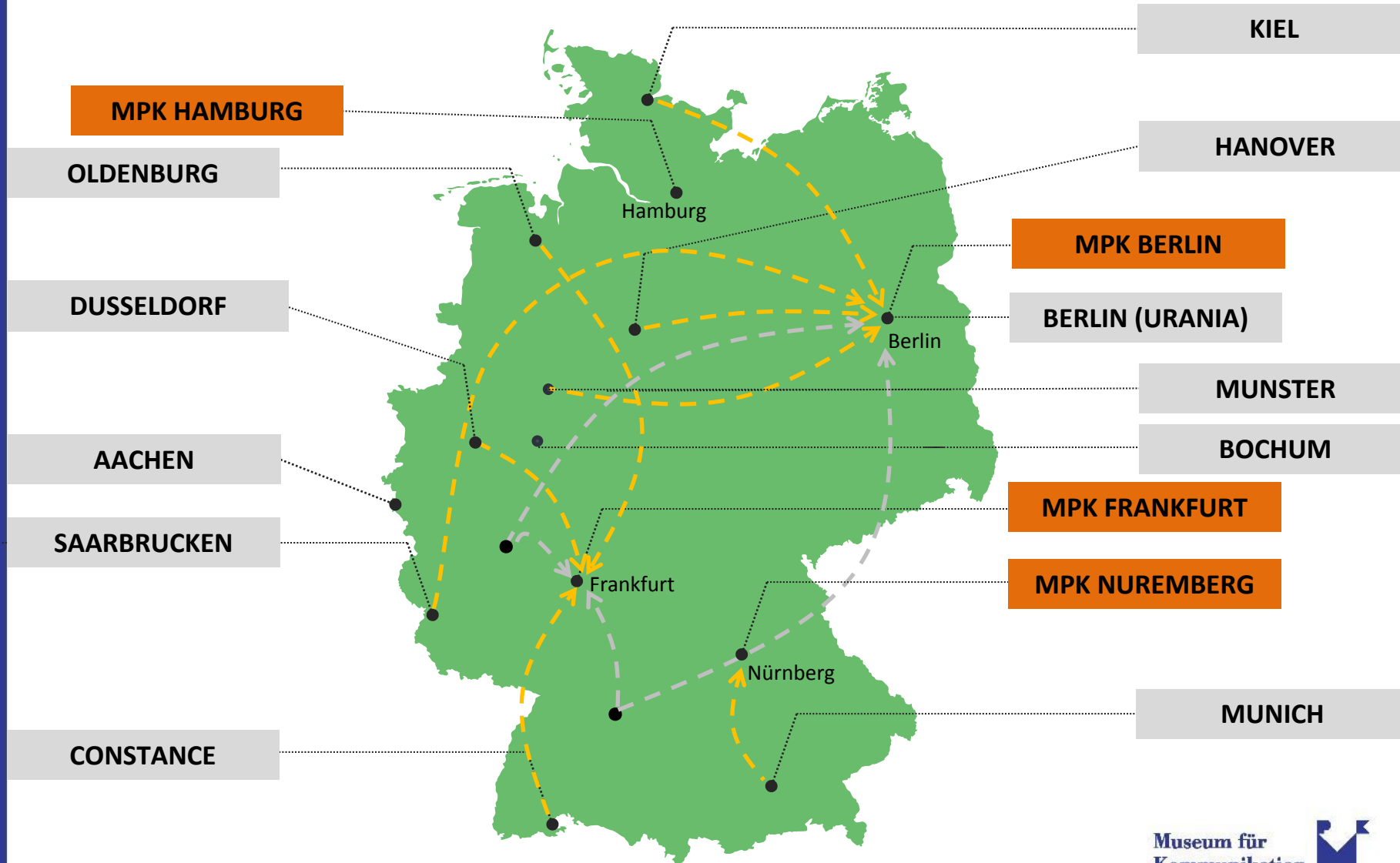Nürnberg

Stuttgart

Museum für Kommunikation Frankfurt

Closed Museums|*Postal Museum Koblenz*

Closed Museums|*Museum of Communication Hamburg*

Dissolution of the Regional Collections 1995 - 2001

KIEL

MPK HAMBURG

OLDENBURG

HANOVER

MPK BERLIN

DUSSELDORF

BERLIN (URANIA)

MUNSTER

BOCHUM

AACHEN

MPK FRANKFURT

SAARBRUCKEN

MPK NUREMBERG

MUNICH

CONSTANCE

Hamburg

Berlin

Frankfurt

Nürnberg

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Dissolution of a Larger Collection:
Telecommunications Collection of the Higher Postal Directorate Dusseldorf
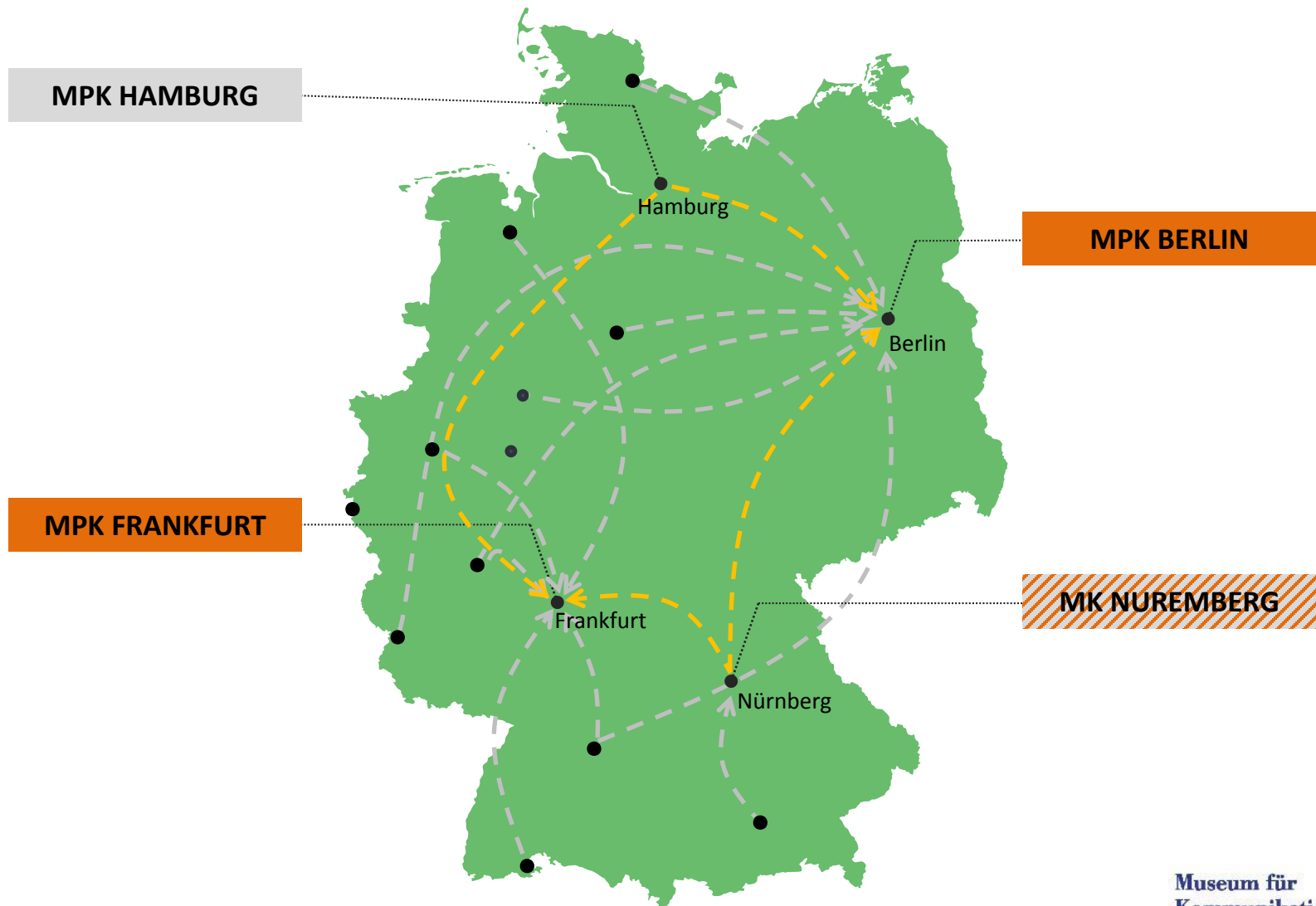
Dissolution of a Larger Collection
Telecommunications Collection of the HPD Dusseldorf

Problems with the Newly Inherited Collections

- They weren't really museum collections
- Even at "real" museums like Koblenz or Stuttgart, there were no curators, but only postal staff
- They had no collection plan and no coordination
- Driven by the idea of rescuing old technology
- The single object was only a replaceable example of a technical development or a design
- <u>All of the collections amassed exactly the same sort of mass-produced objects</u>
- No inventory, no records, no documentation
- Provenance of the objects largely unknown
- Preferably mint objects were collected, often overly restored with traces of use erased

Dissolution of the Museum in Hamburg and of the Collection in Nuremberg 2003 - 2005

MPK HAMBURG

MPK BERLIN

MPK FRANKFURT

MK NUREMBERG

Hamburg

Berlin

Frankfurt

Nürnberg

Museum für Kommunikation Frankfurt

Creation of Collection Focal Points in 2004
Frankfurt: History of Telecommunications and Media
Berlin: Postal History and Logistics
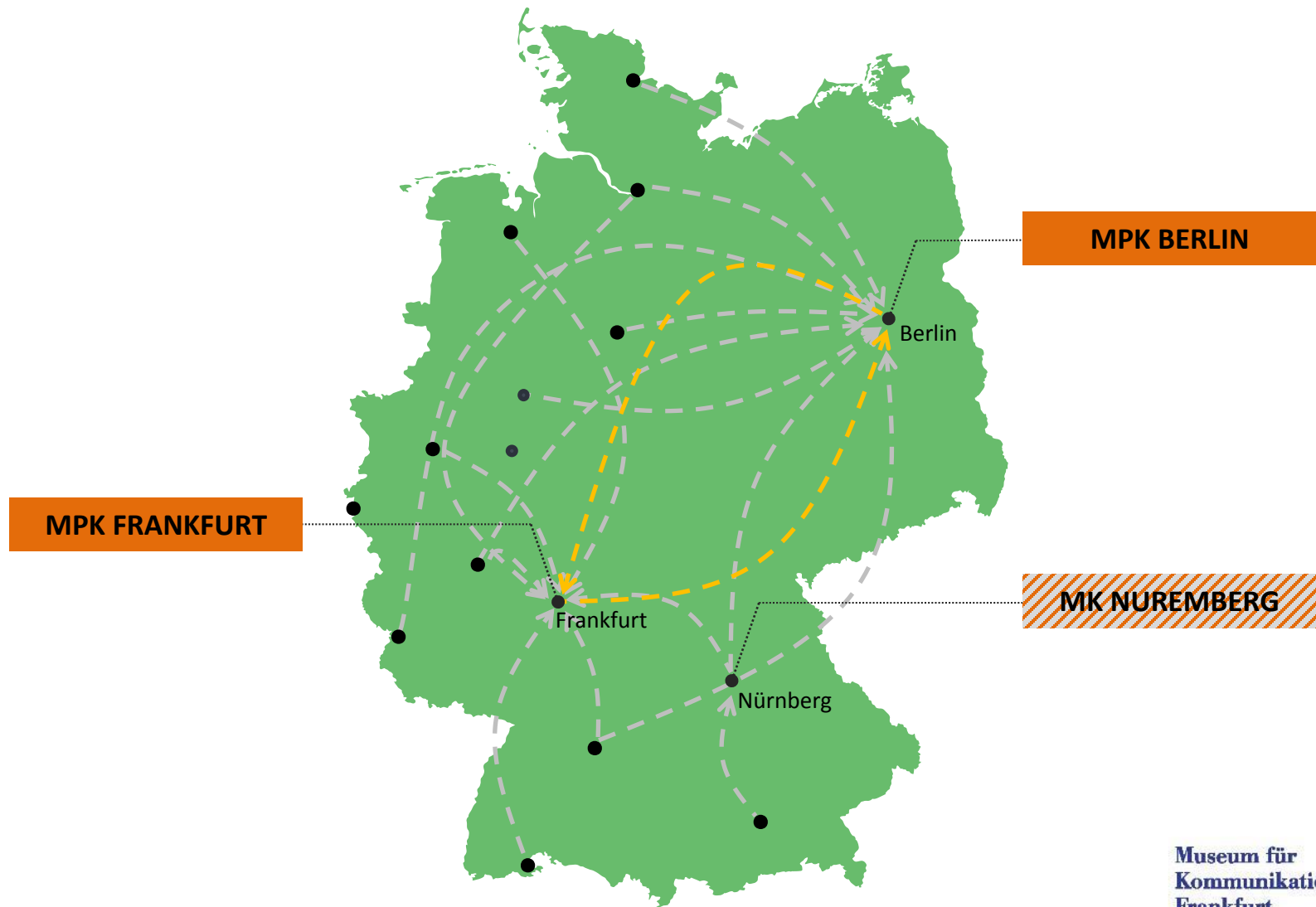
Our Major Problems:

- **Huge quantities**
  During the ten years between 1995 and 2005 about 600,000 objects were moved

- **Time pressure**
  The storage rooms not owned by the foundation had to be cleared at short notice

- **Lack of human resources**
  Although the museum was well-staffed, standard procedures would have required an unrealistically large workforce

- **No framework**
  In Germany, deaccession guidelines didn't exist at that time. No best practice solution

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Deaccession of Collections
Development of the Discussion in Germany

- The advice „take everything with you and decide later"
  was no option

- When we started with the majortity of deaccessions in 1999,
  the idea was largely tabooed in the German museum community

- 2004 position paper of ICOM Germany and German Museum
  Association DMB:
  "... on principle, any kind of cession of collection objects
  contradicts the mission of the museums."
  Only in exceptional cases "under special circumstances it may be
  reasonable for a museum to dispense single objects".

- When the guideline "Sustainable Collecting" was published by
  DMB in 2011, we already had done with most of the disposals

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Our Pragmatic Approach:

- Everything potentially valuable has to be transferred to Frankfurt or Berlin

- The excess of objects must be reduced to a reasonable quantity by disposing of historically worthless items on site

- By any means, avoid irreversible mistakes

Objects Disposed on Site:

- Doublets within the local collection

- Objects of which there were several copies in Frankfurt or Berlin

- Large objects, switching and transmission technology, that already were in our collections at least once

Objects Transferred to Frankfurt or Berlin:

- All objects that we did't had in our collection

- Objects that could not be identified

- Objects with traces of use or a known provenance

- Historical valuable or possibly expensive, even if plentiful in stock (everything before 1920, everything > 200,- €)

- Objects which were probably better preserved than those already in the collection

- **The overwhelming majority of objects was transferred**
- **Approximately 25% were disposed of on site**
- **Almost exclusively objects built after 1945**

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Ethical Problems:

- ➢ **We decided which objects should be regarded as worthless**
- ➢ **No other museums were offered any of our objects**
- ➢ **No documentation of what was thrown away**

But …

- ➢ **Only accessioned objects can be deaccessioned**
- ➢ **Technically, we only disposed of items that belonged to us but had not been accessioned (non-accessions)**

The Weeding Process
Marking of Entire Shelves and Cabinets

Deaccessioning | **Museum of Communication Hamburg, 2005**

The Weeding Process
Marking of Single Objects

Deaccessioning | **Museum of Communication Hamburg, 2005**

The Weeding Process
Separation in Piles of Mixed Lots

Deaccessioning | **Nuremberg, collections storage Allersberger Straße, 2004**

The Weeding Process
End of the Line: Disposal

Deaccessioning **| Museum of Communication Berlin, before relocation to Frankfurt, 2004**

After the Disposal: Uncompleted Tasks

- Result of the consolidation process: excess of objects continues to be a problem

- Reasons: taking along all unclear objects; objects with traces of use, more valuable objects and well-preserved objects

Museum of Communication Frankfurt | **Storage rooms in 2019**

After the Disposal: Uncompleted Tasks

- Within our collection not the unique specimen, but the plentiful object is standard

- This even applied to large objects, vehicles or stagecoaches

- Typical items like telegraphs, telephones or uniforms are identically available dozens of times and more

After the Deacession: Uncompleted Tasks

- Currently, 15% to 30% of the objects can't be justified by the collection plan

- Within 10 years, several 1,000 objects will have to be deaccessioned

Example: Telegraph Collection

- Oldest part of the collection with an above average rate of historically and financially valuable objects

- In 2019 about 2,100 objects were reappraised

- 310 objects were deaccessioned (15%)

Example: Telegraph Collection

- All 310 objects were offered to the museums of the Technical Museums Section of the DMB

- 180 objects (58 %) will be transferred to other museums

- 18 of the remaining objects will be given to private collectors, 102 substandard objects will be disposed of
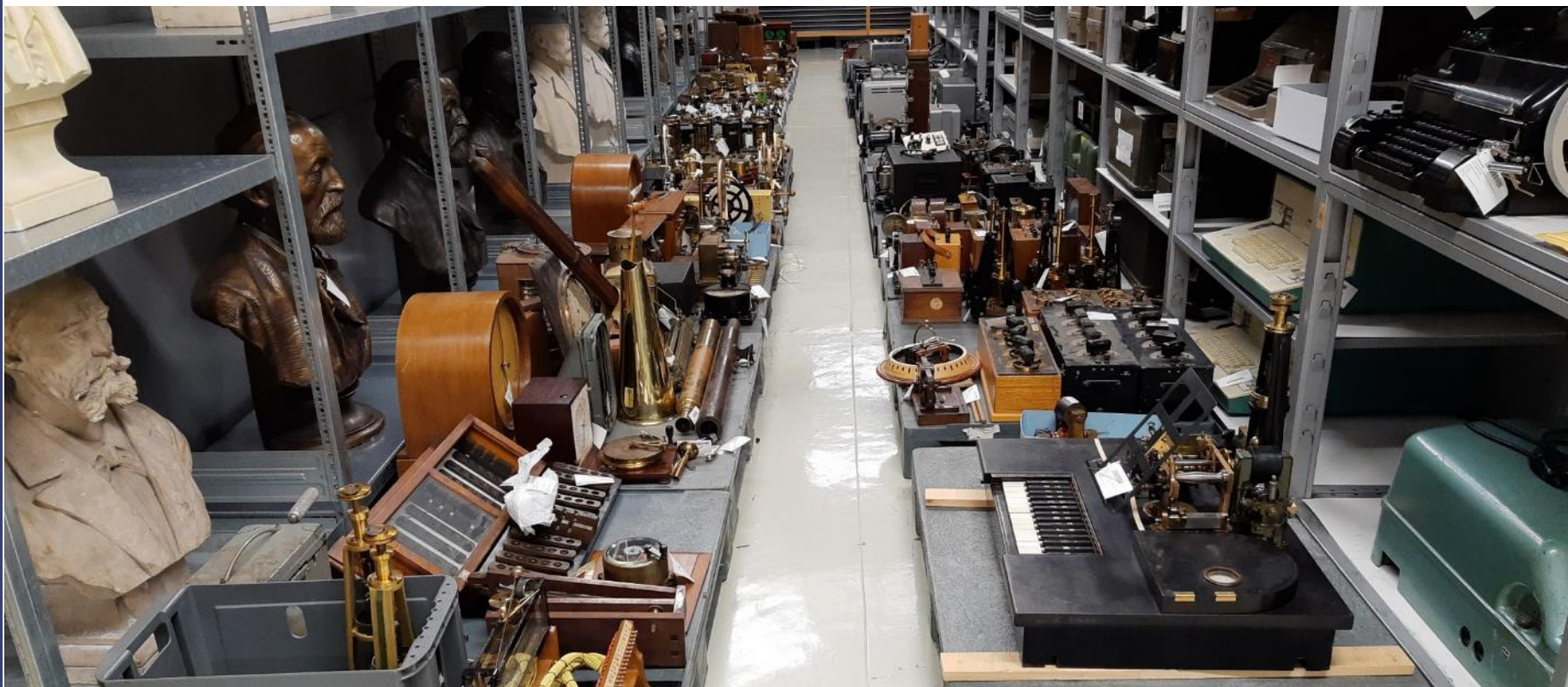
Sustainable Collecting in the Museum Foundation Post and Telecommunication

- The example of the MSPT can not be transferred to other museums
- Without the disposals, the MSPT would have become defunct
- Ongoing deaccessions are necessary to secure the future of our collection
- Deaccessions strengthened the quality of our collection
- Deaccessions helped to limit the costs for storage and documentation

Museum für Kommunikation Frankfurt