

Spectral Aphasia, Psychical Ghost Stories, and Spirit Post Offices: Three Modern Ghost Stories about Communication Infrastructures

Paul Manning, *Trent University, Canada*

ABSTRACT

Nineteenth-century Spiritualism was a watershed moment in which many of the keywords of our communication vocabulary—"medium," "channel," and "communication" itself—were first given fleshly and ghostly form in the spiritualist séance, which early on was likened to a "spiritual telegraph." Throughout this period, newfangled ghosts and communication infrastructures (including the telegraph, but also the equally novel postal service) developed in tandem. This article explores three such boundary genres of communication between the living and the dead: how the séance converted the "spectral aphasia" of haunted houses into the domestic séance; how ghosts of loved ones dying far away across the "phantasmal empire" turned the ghost from an actor to a message, working in tandem with telegrams and letters in the "psychical ghost story"; and lastly, how the American spiritualist press created "spirit post offices" to publish communications from the dead alongside ordinary postal "correspondence" from the living.

As John Durham Peters points out in his wide-ranging history of the idea of communication, *Speaking into the Air*, nineteenth-century Spiritualism was a key watershed moment in which many of the keywords of

Contact Paul Manning at Anthropology, 1600 West Bank Drive, Peterborough, ON, Canada K9L 0G2 (paulmanning@trentu.ca).

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our communication vocabulary—“medium,” “channel,” and “communication” itself—were first given fleshly and ghostly forms in the spiritualist séance (1999, 100). Peters is but one of many scholars (Connor 1999; Noakes 1999, 2002; Sconce 2000; Luckhurst 2002; Galvan 2010, 2012; Harvey 2013) who have explored the powerful metaphoric cross-fertilization between the séance (or “spiritualist telegraph”) and the electric telegraph as parallel media channels of “communication,” in the newfangled sense of messages able to travel without palpable physical sign vehicles (Peters 1999, 94–95). Like many of these other scholars, Peters offers an abbreviated history of this metaphoric kinship between ghostly telegraph and physical telegraph, linking the very first decoding of spirit rappings to the model of the Morse code (1999, 95). In this somewhat reductive approach, Spiritualism becomes interesting to the extent that it reflects on emergent media technologies and on the emergent idea of communication itself: “spirit-rapping becomes an imitation of telegraphic tapping or typewriters, spirit photography a reflection on the ontology of the photographic index, and so on” (Geoghegan 2016, 901). But as Geoghegan stresses, by the time the spiritualist séance was found to be like the newfangled electrical technological infrastructure of the telegraph, it was already a complete technological infrastructure of spiritual communication itself (Geoghegan 2016). While the séance and other phantasmic modes of communication surely made powerful metaphoric and metonymic alliances with newfangled electrical technologies like the telegraph, the photograph, and the like, the séance was fashioned out of traditional ghostly legend genres of haunted houses, and its subsequent development is as much indebted to the equally novel, but often neglected, genres of postal communication that characterize the period (Henkin 2008).

The purpose of this article is to explore the séance and other subsequent genres of phantasmic communication as boundary genres (Morson 1981), investigating them in the emergent moment where they seem to be poised between two genres. In the first section, on “spectral aphasia,” I show how the domestic séance emerged out of the genre and materials of the gothic haunted house, with the surprising result that what started as a haunting of a single place became a haunting of the relation *between* places, and only after this was the séance compared explicitly to the telegraph. But while much research has understandably been struck by the extensive metaphoric traffic between spiritualist séances and the electric telegraph (as well as other novel technologies, notably the photograph), it remains the case that the séance was already a complete system addressed at articulating the “spectral aphasia” of the haunted house into a kind of spectral domestic parlor game, the séance.

In the second section, on the “psychical ghost story,” I show how, alongside the telegraph, the largely British imperial genre of the “psychical ghost story,” which by the 1880s formed the basis for the theory of telepathy (Luckhurst 2002), deployed both the telegram and the postal letter as parallel forms of media which serve to confirm the veridical claims of ghostly telepathic hallucinations operating over vast distances. In this case, the metaphoric comparison between phantasmic and mundane long distance becomes metonymic: the psychical ghost story cannot exist without the “epistemic metanarrative device” (Stewart 1982, 35) of the confirming letter or telegram arriving days or weeks later to confirm the day and time of death. The psychical ghost story explores imperial scales of distance measured in the unfamiliar language of *longitude* to give precision to such epistemic claims of simultaneous actions at a distance. The novel rapidity of telegraphic and postal channels of communication, which “annihilate space and time,” are found by comparison with the fantasy of ghostly instantaneous transmission to be already slow.

In the third section, I show how Spiritualists compared these ghosts of annihilated space and time not only to newfangled electrical technologies like the telegraph, but also to the almost equally newfangled media of postal communication. This comparison took the specific form of the “spirit post office,” a department of the newspaper in which spirits could mail letters, dictated via a medium, to the living. After all, the post office was like the séance in that it was a form of intimate contact mediated by the mysterious agency of strangers. It provided a powerful set of metaphors and a new set of genres for the séance as it entered the public sphere.

Spectral Aphasia

The story of the séance famously begins with the decoding of rappings heard in a haunted house of the Fox family in upstate New York in 1847. By 1850, the inchoate rappings of an angry gothic ghost had become legible as a kind of ghostly code and were soon likened to telegraphic messages from the other world. Accordingly, this is a ghost story told twice: in 1848, these rappings began as a classic gothic ghost story in which the haunting was attached to a house in which a grisly murder had occurred (Lewis 1848). By 1850 this was no longer a conventional legend of a single haunted house with a singular ghost, but an entirely new kind of legend, as the rappings “spread from one house to another and from one neighborhood to another” (Capron and Barron 1850, 9), and the singular ghost became the spirits of different persons (Capron and Barron 1850, 38). Thus, it

moved from being a story of a haunted house to the story of a haunted person, the human medium, embodied initially by the Fox sisters. In 1848, the gothic ghost was still a highly localized being, the prior inhabitant of a haunted house. Afflicted with a kind of “spectral aphasia” (Lang 1894), their only message was to tell the tale of their demise with inarticulate rappings and noises, which were transformed by the mediumistic séance into a spectral code that made this aphasia articulate. As Geoghegan (2016, 903) points out, the séance produced a set of standardized “codes, protocols, and instruments for productive communications” between the human world and the spirit world, enabling its spread as a kind of infrastructure similar to a canal system by enlisting new houses, neighborhoods, persons, and spirits into what would become the domestic séance. By 1850, the spirits of the séance were highly mobile beings, who came to the medium’s house as strangers, as invited guests, much like the living guests of the séance, while their aphasic rappings and noises were decoded as the alphabetic signals of something that would soon be compared to Morse code. It took only two years for the story of the Fox family to move from a familiar story of gothic ghosts in a haunted house to become the first of a new series of stories of spirits communicating at a séance in the manner of a spiritual telegraph. But at the beginning, the story was a kind of borderline narrative, its interpretation caught between two genres, the localized haunted house and the translocal spiritual telegraph.

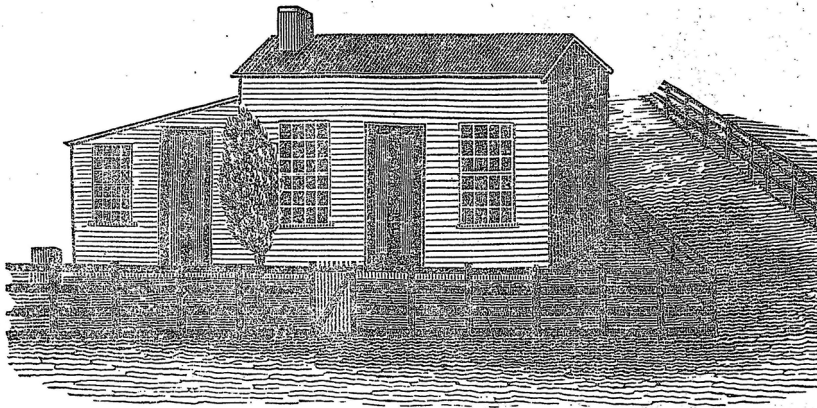
The story of the séance begins as a ghost story. In the earliest tellings of 1848, it begins with one haunted house in Hydesville, New York (Lewis 1848). The haunted house narrative belongs to the broad category of folkloric *legends*, “stories *told as true* and set in the real world—as opposed to folktales or myths set in other worlds or other times” (Manning 2017, 65, original emphasis). The epistemic claims of legends to being “true stories” are underlined by localized settings “just down the road” and a chain of credible contemporary witnesses (Stewart 1982, 35). But as Grider (2007) shows, this is a folkloric legend with literary precursors: the folkloric haunted house begins as a European gothic literary fiction, and the process of localization that defines the folkloric legend turns the haunted European castles of the gothic novel into real American haunted houses just down the road. The fact that the spiritualist séance has its origins in the haunted house narrative is not a novel observation. No less an authority on the ghostly than the author Lafcadio Hearn, writer of weird fiction and inventor of *Ghostly New Orleans* and *Ghostly Japan* (Manning 2017, 2020), complains that the ghosts summoned by the spiritualist séance are essentially a “feeble” domestication of the “legitimate ghost-drama” of the gothic haunted house, a domestication that results in part from modern architecture:

In brief, it may be stated that the ghosts of Spiritualism are domesticated, and harmless by reason of their domestication. . . . Spiritualism, by pretending to familiarize the living with the dead, has not at all succeeded in rendering night less terrible to the superstitious: the greatest enemy of ghosts is, after all, the modern architect. Goblinry and witchcraft flourished best in the Gothic age—the age of turreted castles, and vast cathedrals, and giant palaces—of abyssal cellars, and gloomy halls, and secret chambers—of Gobelin and Bayeux tapestry, grotesque carvings, heraldic emblems, gargoyles, and monsters in wood and stone. The lightsome, airy, modern dwelling-place affords little room for the growth of legend, little shadow for specters to lurk in, and little opportunity for diseased fancy to create any Frankenstein deformities. (Hearn [1875] 1924, 51)

According to Hearn, in Spiritualism the gothic ghost is “domesticated,” moving from being the prior strange inhabitant of a gothic haunted house to an invited familiar guest in the clean, lightsome, airy modern house of the living, and in so doing moves from an object of fear to an object of familiarity.

Hearn sees in the spiritualist séance an inversion of the gothic haunted house. He is not alone. There is plenty of evidence that the Hydesville rappings reported in 1848 (Lewis 1848, 16, 29, 33) were understood in their first tellings as being ghost stories of the haunted house variety. The ideas of spiritualist mediums and the spiritual telegraph are actually a strongly revisionist retelling that coalesces in 1850 (Capron and Barron 1850). In the first account, that of Lewis (1848), the Hydesville rappings are presented classic exemplars of a gothic “haunted house,” a “spook story,” phrases that occur in the mouths of almost all witnesses involved. First of all, the strange rappings are initially localized in the house and only later transferred to one or another of the Fox sisters as medium. Lewis’s original pamphlet of 1848 places the house at the center of attention: there is an illustration of the house as frontispiece, which is omitted from later accounts when the weird phenomena are relocalized onto human agents, that is, mediums (fig. 1).

Whereas later on the spirits contacted at domestic séances would be understood as being any of a number of spirits who had not died in the house and who desired to connect with their loved ones and console them, in the original séance story the spirit is a ghost, the ghost of a stranger, a peddler, who was murdered in the house years before and who was buried in the basement. The rappings that would later be understood as a kind of spiritual Morse code originated as the violent rappings of a telekinetic ghost, which included other



House of John D. Fox, Hydesville, Arcadia, Wayne County, N. Y.

Figure 1. The Haunted House (Lewis 1848)

sounds reenacting its own grisly murder and attempting to show the exact location of its body in the basement, such as:

[a] sound like a death struggle, the gurgling in the throat &c., of a man whose throat was cut; then the sound of dragging a lifeless body across the room, down the stairs, the feet striking on each step; then a sound as if shoveling dirt in the cellar, the nailing of boards, and the filling up of a hastily made grave. . . . Another sound was produced like that of pouring a quantity of clotted blood from a pail on to the floor. (Capron 1855, 51)

All of this grisly detail is classic ghost story stuff, very different from the domesticated sounds of a classic spiritualist séance. The ghost is a perfectly standard gothic ghost, a localized haunter of a house with a story to tell, via pantomime, of its own grisly death. That story is the sum total of what is learned from the proto-séance that decodes its rapping.

In order for the spirit telegraphy narrative to work, the narrative needed to be detached from the haunted house. In a haunted house narrative, “the haunted house functions as both setting and character” (Grider 2007, 144). Accordingly, the frontispiece of the first collection of tellings of this story (Lewis 1848) is a

picture of the house, implying strongly that the house is not only the setting, but also somehow the actor.

The main actor in domesticating this singular unremarkable haunted house (as found in Lewis 1848) into the first of a new series of spiritualist seances was E. W. Capron (Capron and Barron 1850; Capron 1855), an early spiritualist activist and historian. The revisionist narratives of Capron eventually repackaged this particular haunted house as an example of “spiritualist telegraphing” in 1850 (Capron and Barron 1850, 39, 93–94; Capron 1855, 56–87). Capron and Barron aggressively downplayed similarities between the haunted house and the *séance*, while they explored similarities between the *séance* and telegraphy, pointing out, for example, the similarity between the rappings the Fox sisters decoded and the sounds of a telegraph: “The sounds were then heard in both rooms, by either company, exactly similar to the sounds heard in the Telegraph office” (1850, 93). In addition, they insist that those who were near the mediums occasionally feel the sensation or even a shock of electricity when in the presence of the medium (29). But in 1850, Capron and Barron were concerned to move the location and agency of these rappings away from the localized haunting (a single ghost in a single house), replacing the haunted house with human mediums and multiple spirits appearing in many houses. As localization, along with appeals to a chain of authenticated witnesses, is an important indexical epistemic metanarrative device of legends (Stewart 1982, 35), the transformation of the haunting from a localized property of places to a mobile property of persons, that is, mediums, was a vital change. Thus, Capron and Barron argue, there is no more such a thing as a “‘haunted house’ than a haunted out doors, or a haunted side-walk” (44), since the phenomena are associated not with the house, but with the presence of a medium. Capron argues elsewhere that “if there is such a thing as ‘haunted houses,’ they must belong to another class of phenomena” (1855, 171).

As Geoghegan (2016) points out, however, this transition involved not an external technological metaphor, a phantasmic imitation or incorporation of some media technology like the telegraph, but a kind of repackaging of codes and protocols that turned spirit rappings into a kind of standardized code for communication, which became a stable and portable form, able to move from house to house, town to town, and from person to person (Capron and Barron 1850, 37–39). The *séance*, detached from the original haunted house, could enlist new homes, towns, mediums, audiences, and departed spirits as it went, eventually becoming consolidated as a kind of portable communications infrastructure, the domestic *séance* genre:

In Rochester, spirit-rapping became a normalized technical system applicable to a wide range of bodies and settings. Standardized setups and protocols paved the way for reproduction in diverse settings and the replacement of various parts that once seemed intrinsic to its operation (such as the Fox sisters). This emergence of Spiritualism as a “standardized package” permitted its rapid expansion, enabling translation among a much wider array of bodies, discourses, audiences, and sites. (Geoghegan 2016, 907)

Eventually, the emergent genre of (spiritual) “communication” enlisted three kinds of actants: first there were (nonlocalized) active ex-human spirits, who worked through or controlled the second actant, the largely passive human (female) medium, who was frequently likened to a nonhuman, like a galvanic battery (Sconce 2000, 44–50). The third set of actants were the “phenomena” of the séance. “Phenomena” varied according to the medium’s abilities, and mediums were classified according to the different classes of spiritual “phenomena” they produced (see Manning 2018 and references there). “Phenomena” is of course a keyword in the emergent quasi-scientific discourse of Spiritualism: virtually anything that happened at a séance was classified among the “spiritual phenomena” which offered empirical evidence as indexical or dicent signs of ghostly presences. A medium was classified according to the types of phenomena she allowed to manifest. As a medium “developed,” she would display new kinds of phenomena. The spiritual development of an individual medium was recapitulated frequently in the course of a single séance, which might begin with simple telekinetic poltergeist phenomena, as in the rappings of the 1850s, and progressing towards the fuller, more embodied voice and materialization phenomena that came to dominate the séance in the 1870s. Since the female medium (as a kind of posthuman cyborg (Sconce 2000; Galvan 2010, 2012)) was often likened to a nonhuman object, Spiritualists and commentators of the same period sometimes explored the possibility that a house or other object might serve as a material medium, or that the rappings which remained the earliest signs of an incipient séance visitation might have a kinship in the phenomena of the haunted house rather than the telegraph office. Capron and Barron would have liked, perhaps, to exorcise the whole competing haunted house narrative entirely, but this narrative remained as a member of the respectable class of non-séance spiritual phenomena, sharing the same domestic spaces as the séance.

At each step, the rappings in the Fox family house could be understood as simultaneously belonging to this new category of “spirit communication” while

still remaining attached in some capacity to the haunted house: in both cases, the communications had an ex-human ghost or spirit as their source. As a result, first, it could be argued that initially both the Fox sisters and the house itself worked interchangeably as a medium. Second, it could be argued that the class of phenomena that were produced in these new séances included a large number of domesticated and decoded versions of what was usually expected from traditional poltergeists.

In the first case, influential European Spiritualists like Emma Hardinge frequently argued that rather than being a completely distinct kind of phenomena, material media like houses might well play a role completely analogous to the spirit medium in facilitating the communications of spirits. In support of this argument, she adduces, for example, the spontaneous haunted houses animated by the passion of a murdered spirits: “In all these instances a powerful charge of human magnetism is liberated, and this, adhering to wood, stone, plants, or any other contiguous physical substance, forms a permanent mediumistic force which attracts the spirit connected with it, and sometimes even enchains it, for a stated period, to the sphere of the emanations” (Hardinge 1870, 428–29). Hardinge even suggested that this interchangeability was the diagnostic difference between the Old and New Worlds (for this chronotopic division of imaginative geography see Goddu 2000, Manning 2017): the former gothic landscape, steeped in history, was rich in haunted places (including houses); the latter, a new country without history, was populated with spirit mediums, haunted persons, filling analogous roles as circuits between the spirits and the living:

AMERICA is rich in its spirit mediums, lecturers, writers, commentators, public and private circles for spirit investigation—every facility, in short, exists for ingrafting what is termed the “spiritual element” upon the materiality of the physical life. In lieu of these aids, however, to a knowledge of the interior worlds around us, Europe is full of her haunted houses, her fairy groves, and magic lakes; her forests and vales, tenanted by the fantasies of the demon world. (Hardinge 1861, 11)

Lastly, the list of spirit phenomena cannot help but remind one of the rappings and other noises associated with the classic gothic haunted house. Unlike other ghosts, haunters of houses are a noisy breed. It was folklorist and anthropologist Andrew Lang (1844–1912), a member of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR, est. 1882), who most perceptively explored this aspect of the lineage of the séance, noting that the list of phenomena routinely produced at séances, raps, knocks, lights, and so forth, “all imitate the ‘spontaneous’ phenomena

reported to occur in haunted houses” (1894, 149). His interesting suggestion was that the spontaneous signs of the haunted house were a product of a kind of spectral aphasia or “*asemia*,” a problem that the coding protocols of the *séance* in effect, solved:

We urge that the ghost cannot, as it were, express himself as plainly as he would like to do, that he suffers from aphasia. Now he shows as a black dog, now as a green lady, now as an old man, and often he can only rap and knock, or display a light, or tug the bed-clothes. Such are the peculiarities of spectral aphasia, or rather *asemia*. The ghost can make signs, but not the right signs. (Lang 1894, 158–59)

Where the rappings of a gothic ghost were once terrifying telekinetic signs of violence, they are now decoded as articulate signs of an alphabetic code. While this is often linked to Morse code, Geoghegan argues that the connection came later:

Yet the technical amalgamations of Spiritualism are obscured by appeals to a media technical *a priori*, with its emphasis on the correlation of a particular technology (telegraphy, photography, the typewriter) to the cultural forms of Spiritualism. Moreover, such cultural histories attribute a stability and identity to the medium that in most cases did not emerge until decades later. Spiritualism did not imitate media; it offered a means to scale between the gaps in these emerging technical forms, elaborating codes, protocols, and instruments for productive communications. Spiritualism is not a text but a machine. (Geoghegan 2016, 902–3)

It took only two years for the story of the Fox family to move from a familiar old story of gothic ghosts in a haunted house to become the first of a new series of stories of domesticated spirits communicating politely at a *séance*. These new-fangled ghosts of the spiritualist *séance* were “domesticated” successors of their terrifying gothic forebears, replacing the gothic ghost in the same way that modern household architecture replaced the gothic house. Ghosts were now portable.

The Psychical Ghost Story

If the *séance* began as a classic ghost story, it was quickly domesticated so that the rappings and noises were no longer to terrify, but to edify. The departed were no longer angry “ghosts”—prior residents who seek revenge on the living—but benevolent “spirits,” invited guests who seek contact with their loved ones through the mediation of a stranger, the medium. These spirits are no longer

localized like the gothic ghost, but as mobile as telegraphic messages from the dead. Indeed, they eventually became transformed into telepathic messages between the living (Luckhurst 2002; McCorristine 2010). The transition from the haunted house to the séance thus parallels another contemporaneous modification of the ghost drama, what Virginia Woolf in 1918 would dub the “psychical ghost story.” Just as the haunted house story is found in both folkloric and literary versions, the psychical ghost story of the latter half of the nineteenth century exists both as literature and legend (examples of the former can be found among the stories of Molesworth (1888) and Wilkins (1903), while *Phantasms of the Living* (Gurney et al. 1886) can be treated in effect as a vast folkloric collection of stories of this kind). In the spiritualist séance, the haunted house moves from being a mediumistic actor alongside a ghost in a localized haunted house narrative to becoming simply a place where the human medium invites the living and dead to meet one another in her drawing room with the séance. In the psychical ghost story, similarly, the ghost is no longer associated with the trappings of the gothic (“We are not afraid of ruins, or moonlight, or ghosts” (Woolf 1918)), and the erstwhile ghost becomes in the end a “veridical hallucination” of a kind of telepathy, not an agent telling a story of its own demise, but instead a message sent from a living person on the verge of death. This transition of ghost from agent to percept or message sent by a dying agent becomes the core of a “new genre of ghost-seeing,” as McCorristine (2010) puts it. The extensive documentation by the Society for Psychical Research of “phantasms of the living” (1886) thus becomes the basis for the SPR’s development of the theory of “telepathy” by the early 1880s (on which see Luckhurst 2002).

But the “psychical ghost story” was not summoned into existence by the theory of telepathy, nor is it another phantasm imitating a newfangled technology such as radio. The psychical ghost story, like the séance, grows out of an earlier legendary cycle of ghost stories which predate the theory of telepathy by decades. Even the earliest formulation of something like the theory of telepathy (see JTK 1869 for discussion of “brain waves”) is founded on legends of this type (Luckhurst 2002), which, according to McCorristine, take the following typical form:

Depression of percipient—spontaneous hallucination—assurance of wakefulness—lack of documentation or witness verification—textual announcement of death—death of agent suddenly and at a distance from the percipient. (McCorristine 2010, 146)

The psychical ghost story contains many of the epistemic metanarrative devices of legends (Stewart 1982, 35). The precise localization and time of both the

event of perception and the event of death are particularly important here, and the percipient often notes down the time of the event, for example. Here are some typical examples, suitably shortened, from *Phantasms of the Living*:

In December, 1881, we were living at 6, George Street, (East) Melbourne, Victoria. My father resided then, as he does now, at Phillimore Lodge, Kensington, W. In those days I always went to bed about midnight. I awoke suddenly, tremendously startled by a dream that my father's house was on fire. The dream impressed me so vividly that I felt convinced that a fire had actually happened there, and, striking a light, I walked across the room to the dressing-table, on which my diary lay (I used generally to jot down the events of the day just before turning in), and made a brief entry of it, there and then, first looking at my watch in order to be able to set down the time, which I found to be 1 a.m. . . . *Six or seven weeks afterwards (mail contract between London and Melbourne is 42 days) I received a letter from my father, dated December 22nd, 1881. He wrote:*

'We had a fire on Sunday evening while we were at church.' . . . (Gurney et al. 1886, 98; italics added)

In 1845 I was stationed with my regiment at Moulmein, in Burmah. *In those days there was no direct mail, and we were dependent upon the arrival of sailing vessels for our letters, which sometimes arrived in batches, and occasionally we were months without any news from home.* On the evening of the 24th of March, 1845, I was, with others, dining at a friend's house, and when sitting in the verandah after dinner, with the other guests, in the middle of a conversation on some local affairs, I all at once distinctly saw before me the form of an open coffin, with a favourite sister of mine, then at home, lying in it apparently dead. I naturally ceased talking, and everyone looked at me in astonishment, and asked what was the matter. I mentioned, in a laughing manner, what I had seen, and it was looked upon as a joke. I walked home later with an officer very much my senior (the late Major-General George Briggs, retired, Madras Artillery, then Captain Briggs), who renewed the subject, and asked whether I had received any news as to my sister's illness. I said no, and that my last letters from home were dated some three months prior. He asked me to make a note of the circumstance, as he had before heard of such occurrences. I did so, and showed him the entry I made opposite the day of the month in an almanack. On the 17th of May following, I received a letter

from home announcing my sister's death as having taken place on that very day—viz., the 24th of March, 1845.

R. Waller Jones.

As to the coincidence of hour, Colonel Jones only learnt that the death occurred in the morning of the 24th. His vision was seen after an early dinner, so that, *allowing for longitude, the correspondence of time was certainly near, and may have been exact.* There had been a very close attachment between sister and brother. (Gurney et al. 1886, 206, italics added)

If the haunted house is a story about a place, the psychical ghost story is about space: central to the story is the “annihilation of space and time” (Schivelbusch 1977), a sense of simultaneity between two persons over vast distances, measured with precision, correcting for longitude. In many cases, the core of the narrative is that the percipient and the agent are located on separate continents at very different longitudes. If the séance invites metaphoric comparison with the telegraph, the psychical ghost story turns this metaphor into a metonym. The narrative frequently includes the arrival of a telegram (or letter, as above) as one of the key actors in the story. Indeed, a psychic ghost story is incomplete without incorporating some commentary on postal or telegram infrastructures whose existence, and whose relatively slow speed, constitute the gap in time and space which constitutes the narrative potential for this kind of story (italicized above).

There is actually one example where the spontaneous séance emerging in New York State is at the same time an early candidate example of the psychical ghost story, another boundary genre. The earliest explicit comparison between the electric and spiritual telegraph occurs in 1849, as follows. A certain Mr. Pickard, a guest in the house of a certain Reverend Jarvis learns from his mother's spirit of the demise of his child in a very early, apparently spontaneous, séance of the kind that we saw spreading from person to person, house to house and town to town above. He returns home by coach, Lockport being sixty miles distant. Subsequently, a telegraph envelope arrives with a confirmation of the fact of the death and the time:

Rochester, April 10th, 1849.

By telegraph from Lockport to Rev. A. H. Jarvis, No. 4, West St “Tell Mr. Pickard—if you can find him—his child died this morning. Answer R. MALLORY.”

I then read it to my wife, and said “this is one of the best and most convincing evidences of the intelligence of those invisible agents,” and then I added “God’s telegraph has outdone Morse’s altogether.”

Yours truly.

To E. W. Capron, Auburn. A. H. JARVIS.

(Capron and Barron 1850, 38–39)

This exchange is famous as the earliest moment at which there is an explicit comparison between the telegraph and the spiritual telegraph or *séance*. But there is more to it than that: first of all, spiritual telegraph is not merely like the electric telegraph, because the ghostly telegraph outdoes the electric one in that it is instant, while the electric telegraph, like the postal network, is quite slow in comparison. There is a common misapprehension that the telegraph was virtually instantaneous, but this was only true for very short, local station-to-station transmissions; in reality long distance telegrams could take days to be relayed from station to station and usually arrived in envelopes looking just like letters. In many ways telegrams operated as simply another form of postal correspondence, something that arrives after a certain delay in an envelope.

But in the gap between the hallucination and the confirmation by telegram or postal letter is born a new kind of narrative potential, fodder for a new genre of legendary “ghost-seeing.” The paradigmatic structure is as follows: (a) there is a ghostly communication, usually that someone has died in a distant place; (b) the time of this communication is noted exactly; (c) at some point later, a telegram or a letter arrives to confirm the precise date and time of the ghostly communication. This is the basis of the telepathic or psychical ghost story and is also the basis for early articulations of the theory of telepathy in the 1880s. The earliest published example is adduced as evidence for a theory of “brain waves” articulated in 1869 (JTK 1869; see Luckhurst 2002, 154). This theory is founded on legends such as the following: a person in Britain thinks of a friend who is far away in the colonies, accompanied by “a restless and indefinable discomfort,” a “strange and mysterious misery,” and notes the exact time and date of this weird feeling. He feels certain that he will hear some news of his friend by post soon, “And surely, when the next mail or the next but one arrived, there came the horrible news that at that very day and hour (*allowance being made for longitude*) his friend had been made prisoner by the natives of New Zealand, and put to a slow death with the most frightful tortures.” (JTK 1869, 136, original emphasis). The concern for precise calibration of the two times by reference to longitude is a leitmotif of the psychic ghost story, one of the epistemic metanarrative

devices that constitutes the sense of simultaneity of the hallucination and the “enunciative object” (McCorristine 2010, 148), the letter or telegram. The standardization of space-time of longitude is the same kind of infrastructural protocol referenced by Geoghegan (2016), which establishes the psychical ghost story as being part of the extended family of genres associated with trains, telegraphs, and the postal network.

The psychical ghost story then emerges as a novel vernacular legend genre, one that expresses the vast distances of the British empire, and constitutes its narrative possibilities out of those distances, by dwelling on the temporal gap between instantaneous spiritual communications and slower telegraphic or postal communications over these distances. Compared to the instantaneity of the psychic transmission, the difference between the telegram and the postal letter is irrelevant. Ghosts became ghostly messages flitting on spiritual wires across the vast distances of empire, so that specters of people who were dying far away could make the exact moment of their demise known faster on the spiritual telegraph than a real telegraph. But such a story could not exist without incorporating the telegraph or the post into its very narrative structure, because the veracity of this early report would be then vouchsafed precisely by the arrival of a dated letter or telegraph message some time later (McCorristine 2010). The two volumes of *Phantasms of the Living* (Gurney et al. 1886) provide hundreds of examples that follow the form of this kind of legend. Importantly, many of these date back much earlier than any version of the theory of telepathy, or even the spiritualist séance, but they all arise in the wake of the combined telegraphic and postal revolutions in the US and Britain in this period.

In the year 1849 I was staying in Edinburgh. One Sunday as I was dressing my second boy (aged 5 years) for church at about 10.30 a.m., he looked up at me and said, “Mother, Cousin Janie is dead.” I asked him which Cousin Janie he meant, and he answered, “Cousin Janie at the Cape, she’s dead.” I then tried to make him explain why he thought so, but he only kept repeating the statement. This “Cousin Janie” was a girl of about 16 who had been staying in Edinburgh, and had gone out to the Cape with her parents some months before. She had been very fond of my boys, and had often played with them. I was rather struck by the way the child kept repeating what he had said, and wrote down the day and the hour, and told my mother and sisters. Some time afterwards the Cape mail brought the news that the girl had died on that very Sunday.

She had been badly burnt the night before, and had lingered on till a little after midday. (Gurney et al. 1886, 1:245)

Again and again we find narratives where the afflicted agent and percipient are not only on different continents with different longitudes, but one is seemingly always in the colonies and the other in the metropole, expressing the anxieties of a British imperial diaspora (what Luckhurst [2002, 154] calls “the phantasmal empire”):

The fact that late Victorian Britain imagined itself at the core of an imperial community found expression in the content of a large number of the psychological ghost stories of the period. *Phantasms* quite literally had to map out certain cases of ghost-seeing with many narratives involving the death of an agent far from Britain, proving even more strongly to psychical researchers the power of telepathic rapport to traverse huge amounts of space in order to reach its target. This vast geographic diaspora of potentially dying British persons comes out in the cosmopolitanism of *Phantasms* with ghost-seeing cases involving apparitions of agents from Australia, South Africa, Burma and India, all *ipso facto* informing the percipient of their demise days before they could otherwise have known. . . . While the metaphor of telegraphy had been present in the spiritualist discourse from its inception, the telegram as an enunciative object became a central constituent of the psychological ghost story. . . . (McCorristine 2010, 147–48)

Thus, two series of post-gothic ghost narratives appear more or less simultaneously in the shadow of the expansion of the telegraph, and, it must be emphasized, much more importantly, a massive reorganization of the postal system in both the United States (beginning with the postal reforms of 1845 [Henkin 2008]) and the British Empire (beginning with the Penny Post in 1839 [Joyce 2013, 85–90]). Both of these reforms created standardized weights, measures, addresses, and in particular, adhesive stamps that permitted prepaid letters at affordable prices, which in turn permitted a large number of new actors to be enrolled into the postal system, creating “postal societies.” This democratization and spread of the postal infrastructure (a universalized infrastructure of communication including the circulation of letters, newspapers and, indeed, ultimately, telegrams) afforded, after around 1850, the possibility of new kinds of ghost stories. No longer tethered to haunted places, but mediating the spaces between these places, these ghost stories often expressed a sense of simultaneity and contact

over vast distances that outdid that afforded by the post and the telegram. In the United States, the haunted house became the domestic séance; in the British empire, the ghost story became the legendary and literary psychical ghost story, eventually the basis of the theory of telepathy. Both are, in one way or another, reformulations of existing ghost legends that relate to new infrastructures of communication either through comparison or by incorporating them into the story itself. One of the conditions of narrative possibility for the tellability of a psychical ghost story legend is the infrastructural network of the new postal system, including letters, newspapers, and telegrams, with its standardization of space and time (including the precise calculation of relative time permitted by reference to longitude) (Schivelbusch 1977, 3–44; Joyce 2013, 123–27).

This emphasis on ghosts moving in the infrastructural spaces *in between* is shared between the psychical ghost story and the famous North American urban legend of the “vanishing hitchhiker,” first documented in California in 1942 (Hankey 1942). Beardsley and Hankey (1943) identify the modern nature of the vanishing hitchhiker ghost story based on how it indexes the conditions of urban modernity in form and content. These conditions include technological modernity through the automobile, but also modern forms of stranger sociability, which extend beyond hitchhiking to include the fact that the characters of the story are always anonymous fellow urbanites, stranger-contemporaries identified only by trade or profession. Even the ghost is decidedly unlike its grisly gothic forebears in appearance and habits, appearing as an ordinary, contemporary stranger on the streets of the modern city. The ordinariness of the ghost, as Beardsley and Hankey point out (1943, 14n12), is also characteristic of modern literary ghost stories (they cite examples from the stories of fellow Californian transplant Ambrose Bierce [1842–1914] as well as Mary Wilkins [1903]). The vanishing hitchhiker is an urban stranger, almost always a young woman, who simply wants to go home. The vanishing hitchhiker story is, like many ghost stories, a spare narrative, consisting almost entirely of evidential metanarrative devices localizing the legend with great precision (one can often plot the whole story on Google maps). A typical example goes like this:

Berkeley. – A young man picked up a girl at College Avenue and Bancroft Way. He took her to an address on Durant Avenue. She disappeared. On inquiring, he found she was the deceased daughter of a professor of the University of California. (Hankey 1942, 173)

While some folklorists have made valiant attempts to find a traditional predecessor for this kind of story, Beardsley and Hankey emphasized that “the

vanishing hitch-hiker is a modern story, showing features of the contemporary tale and reflecting contemporary civilization” (Beardsley and Hankey 1943, 16). Like the psychical ghost story, the narrative presupposes a modern infrastructural network, in this case a Californian network of roads, modern automobiles, and indeed, forms of stranger sociability like hitchhiking as an accepted social practice. It is a story expressing the anxieties of modern North American automobile society. But in both cases, the ghost is someone who is far from home, who wants to go home. In both cases, modern transport and communications technology figure centrally in the ghost story. What we see in all these newfangled versions of the ghost story, however, is a series of parallels: the gothic ghost, which was a homebody haunting only houses, was replaced by a series of new ghosts, cosmopolitan wandering ghosts that marked dislocations and anxieties caused by long distance movement, a ghost that haunted the spaces *in between*, the infrastructural “non-places” (Auge 1995, 79) of communication standing between inhabited places. Moreover, where the gothic ghost is, like the entire genre of the gothic, concerned with the past, these modern ghosts are contemporaries of the percipient.

The psychical ghost story shows us a ghost story (folkloric and literary) that incorporates the postal letter as one of a set of enunciative objects (including the telegram and newspaper) that produce the evidential basis and the denouement of the story. I will close the article, then, with a third genre in which the ghost and the post office become even more thoroughly connected.

The Spirit Post Office

For all the telegraphic metaphors emphasizing distance and speed, the fact remains that spiritualist séances depended on, and were publicized through, the agency of the postal service, including both postal correspondence and newspapers. What most Spiritualists knew about the original Hydesville haunted house and subsequent séances and spirits came not from attending séances, but from reading about them in spiritualist newspapers like the Boston *Banner of Light* (henceforth cited as *Banner*). While the séance was frequently compared to a spiritualist telegraph, it propagated largely through the mundane agency of spiritualist newspapers, some of which had suggestive names like *The Spiritualist Telegraph*, which arrived by the mysterious agency of the strangers of working for the Post. In the period from 1845 to 1860, the around same period as the rise of the séance, “a critical mass of Americans began reorganizing their perceptions of time, space, and community around the existence of the post” (Henkin 2008, 3). Whereas prior to this the postal network had primarily been for the

distribution of newspapers, in this period the post office became the center of public civil life, and new genres of private epistolary contact between estranged intimates became much more widespread (Henkin 2008). During the Civil War in particular this postal network became an integral part of the experience of the war (Henkin 2008, 138). Not only did living soldiers correspond regularly from the front lines, but soldiers frequently carried their final letters into battle so that relatives could receive letters authored by soldiers themselves, now dead (Faust 2001). The post (including both private letters and public newspapers) and the séance spread as parallel infrastructures of communications alongside one another in this period and as such, the Civil War generated both literal letters from the dead in the post office, and a large number of spirit letters in the spirit post office.

In addition to being distributed through the post, spiritualist newspapers were themselves largely constituted out of correspondence that arrived in the post: each newspaper was essentially a heterogeneous and heteroglossic amalgam of letters and other postal contributions. Not only did the postal service make possible an “imagined community” of fellow séance-goers, but the séance itself was shot through with postal metaphors and genres. Alongside familiar metaphors of telegraphy (Wolfe [1873] 1875, 250–56), accounts from the period mention spirit letters—peculiar letters without any postage on them—written by writing mediums in the séance on slates (Wolfe [1873] 1875, 147); mediums who specialized in reading sealed letters, “spirit post-masters” (Wolfe [1873] 1875, 39, 67, 494); and, in the case of the spirit post office of the *Banner of Light*, even spirit postal boxes where spirits could deposit letters through a medium.

What the spiritualist séance has in common with the haunted house is that they are both ultimately stories about strangers in the home. In the séance, however, the stranger is a normative element, an invited guest, while in the haunted house, it is a disruptive prior occupant. Accordingly, much like the post, the séance is really a liminal borderland between strangers and intimates, the public and the private sphere. Epistemically, the presence of strangers at a séance was necessary to provide proof of otherworldly contact. Séances were also publics in Michael Warner’s sense, that is, defined by the normative presence of strangers (Warner 2002): these were not only face-to-face publics of actual séance-goers, but print publics, since séances were also read about in the thriving spiritualist press. While Warner draws attention to the fact that publics are constituted by address to strangers (2002, 58), in my view publicness and stranger sociability are much more broadly entangled with all aspects of the Jakobsonian speech circuit in the séance context: one might not only address strangers, but one might speak as a stranger (writing under a pseudonym or anonymously) or through a

stranger, as when spirits write through mediums. The channel of phatic contact itself might be made up of strangers, as when newspapers addressed to the public were carried by the infrastructural mediation of anonymous contemporaries doing “phatic labor” (Elyachar 2010), the humans and nonhumans of the postal network. Anderson (1983) famously argues that the inferred existence of fellow contemporary readers of the newspaper, a communion of readers calibrated by the periodicity of the dated appearance of this “one day best seller,” provided the basis for an “imagined community” of a print public. In a similar way, the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz uses the example of the inferred existence of the postal worker, an anonymous stranger who will read the address and speed the letter on its way. Schutz adduces the inferred existence of the postal worker to illustrate an idealized sociological type who is also a qualitatively new, specifically modern, genus of person, the anonymous contemporary co-inhabiting the space of modernity, a person acting as infrastructure:

If I drop a letter into the mailbox, I act in the expectation that certain contemporaries of mine (post office employees) will adequately interpret the wish I signified by writing out an address, attaching a stamp, etc., and will in fact carry it out. The expectation which oriented my action was not directed to specific concrete individuals but to the genus “post office employees.” (Schutz 1964, 44)

What I want to suggest is that the postal system as a public mediation by strangers was a crucial and neglected model for imagining the séance, alongside the ubiquitous technological metaphor of the telegraph. The postal service included both newspapers, addressed to publics, and private letters, addressed to intimates but carried by strangers. It opened a potentially dangerous liminal space between the “masculine” public world of strangers and the “feminine” private domestic world of intimates. Séances, similarly, were liminal, potentially scandalous, events. They were public events held in private spaces, presided over by a female medium, taking place in the feminine domestic space of the house. The séance, like the postal service, connected the “domestic spirit circle and the public world of strangers,” opening phatic, and sometimes haptic, channels between the living and the dead (McGarry 2008, 114–17). Séances were subdivided by a recursive logic into public and private séances: a public séance was open to strangers and would be reported to strangers in the press to the outside masculine public world of strangers, mediated by postal service and newspapers; a

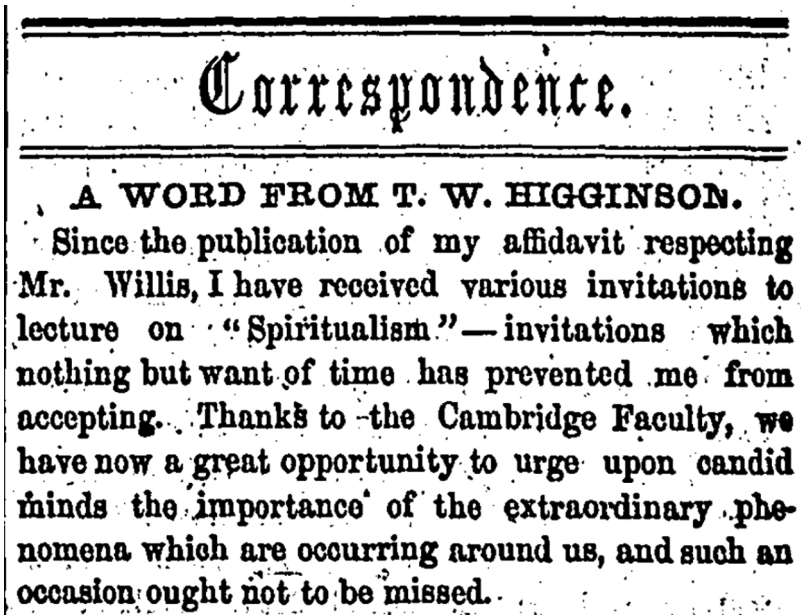


Figure 2. *Banner of Light*, Correspondence (June 12, 1857)

private séance was one to which strangers were not invited or that was not to be reported in the newspaper.

Newspapers shared the same liminality between public and private as the séance: newspapers were public texts but often read in private, and were often amalgamated out of the epistolary correspondence of private individuals, so that print publics were also constituted both by postal infrastructural networks and epistolary genres. The most striking examples of what we can call the “postal” model of spiritual communion are found in various experiments of genre in *Banner*. Alongside the usual correspondence department for letters from living human readers (fig. 2), *Banner* ran a parallel “Communications” department that published “such communications as are written through various mediums by persons in the spirit world and sent to us” (fig. 3).

The term “communication,” diagnostic of telegraphic communication, is here already used as a term of art in spiritualist parlance for messages from the spirit world, opposed to “correspondence,” which is used for physical messages carried by the post on paper. But the most important defining section of the *Banner* as a specifically spiritualist newspaper was the *Messenger* (1857–62) (fig. 4) renamed the *Message Department* by 1862 (fig. 5), both of which constitute more a specific form of “communication,” specializing in the publishing of

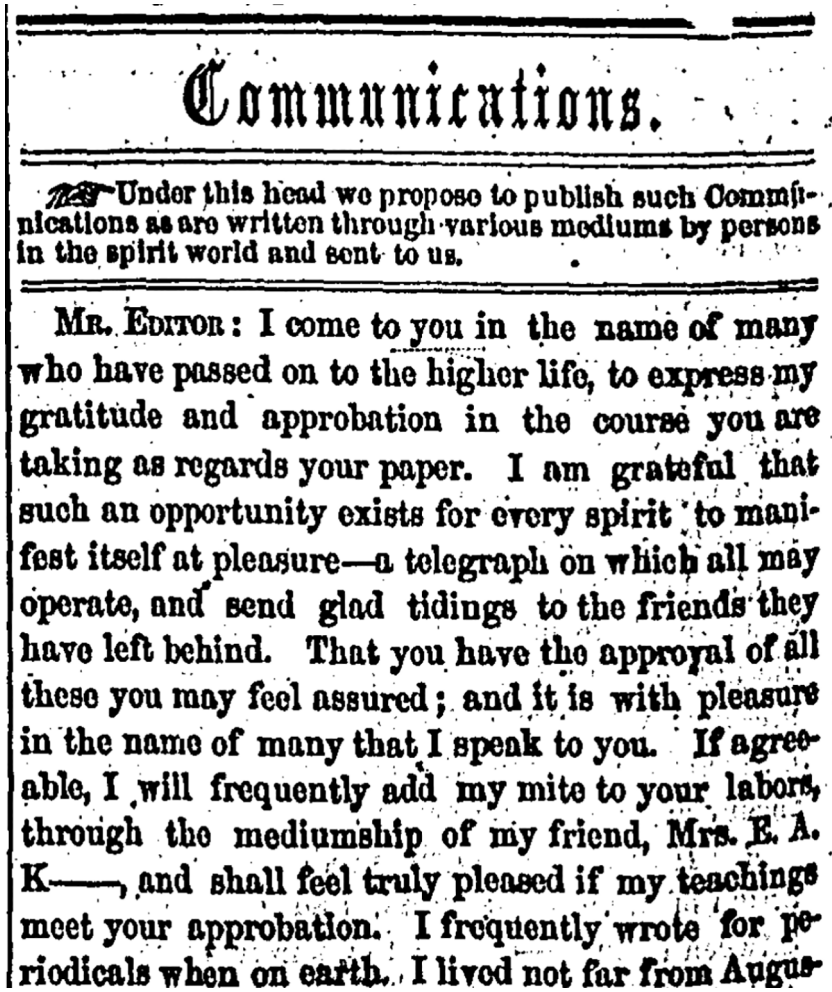


Figure 3. Banner of *Light*, Communications [June 12, 1857]

private messages through a medium (the agency of strangers), from departed spirits to their friends and relatives on Earth.

The Messenger (beginning with the very first issue in 1857) took the form of an actual séance, free and open to the public, held weekly in the newspaper offices, by a single trance medium, who would take dictation, so to speak, of letters from the dead, or would sometimes act as interlocutor with the spirits. Part of the reorganization of this section into the *Message Department* of 1862 seems to have involved the appointment of a “chairman” who would converse with

The Messenger.

Under this head we shall publish such communications as may be given us through the mediumship of Mrs. J. H. CONANT, whose services are engaged exclusively for the *Banner of Light*.

The object of this department is, as its head partially implies, the conveyance of messages from departed Spirits to their friends and relatives on earth.

The communion of Spirits with mortals is now an established fact, not admitting of a doubt from any one who has investigated the phenomena which is attracting so much attention at the present time.

This communion is brought about only by strict adherence to natural laws, and under favorable conditions; and however anxious one's Spirit friends may be to convince those they have left behind them of their existence and presence, without the observance of these laws and conditions, it is impossible. The presence of medial power is one of the requisites.

Many people cannot consult mediums, and far more have strong prejudices resulting from false ideas of their mission. In either case, Spirits find it impossible to communicate with their earth friends in a manner to prove their presence.

We have been very successful in gathering valuable tests of the presence and power of Spirits of whose existence we never knew, for friends on earth who were *equally strangers* to us.

So very convincing have these tests been to us, and to those to whom they were sent, that we feel confident that such as we publish will be interesting to the public, and bear fruits which shall prove refreshing to humanity.

Communications made in this manner cannot fail to open the door of Spirit communion wide, and prove the fact thereof; while the opportunity afforded to the Spirit world to reach their friends on earth, cannot be without effect in adding to the joys of Spirit-life.

These communications are not published for literary merit. Truth is all we ask for. Our questions are not noted—only the answers given to them.

We solicit replies from those to whom they are addressed, and will endeavor to answer any queries relating to them which may be sent us.

We also solicit questions on Theological subjects, to be answered through Mrs. C. Our object is to remove the prejudice existing among religionists against Spiritualism, and show that it is sent from Heaven, not to demolish the Bible, but to prove its truth.

Spirits are charged with teaching immortality and upholding vice. The communications we publish will be interesting as exponents of their teaching, and showing that they demand the practice of the Christian virtues, and always point to Christ as the way, the Truth, and the Life.

These messages are published as communicated, without alteration by us.

Figure 4. *Banner of Light*, The Messenger (April 11, 1857)

Message Department.

Each message in this department of the *BANNER* we claim was spoken by the spirit whose name it bears, through Mrs. J. H. COWART, while in a condition called the Trance. They are not published on account of literary merit, but as tests of spirit communion to those friends who may recognize them.

These messages go to show that spirits carry the characteristics of their earth-life to that beyond—whether good or evil.

We ask the reader to receive no doctrine put forth by spirits in these columns that does not comport with his reason. Each expresses so much of truth as he perceives—no more.

Our Circles.—The circles at which these communications are given, are held at the *BANNER* or *LIGHT* OFFICE, No. 158 WASHINGTON STREET, Room No. 3. (up stairs.) every MONDAY, TUESDAY and THURSDAY afternoon, and are free to the public. The doors are closed precisely at three o'clock, and none are admitted after that time.

Figure 5. *Banner of Light*, Message Department (February 22, 1862)

spirits, who spoke through the medium, rather than have the medium speak in her own person as well as the spirit in a trance state, thereby playing all the speaking roles. The chairman not only served as the addressee of the spirits, but also in a number of other roles on the boundary of print public and séance public. By 1870 at least there was a vogue for “spirit postmaster” mediums who specialized in answering “sealed letters” (Wolfe [1873] 1875, 39–44) brought to seances. The *Banner* was (by 1874 at least) careful to segregate this special spiritualist form of letter from “proper correspondence” which was sent by mail and read and answered in the usual way. While visitors to the free circle could bring sealed letters to be answered by the spirits, letters sent by mail were not answered: “Sealed letters by MAIL are *not* answered by spirits at this office. Such letters are only answered briefly for visitors at our Free Circles. Proper questions by correspondents,

which are read by the Chairman, are answered, and the Questions and Answers printed in the Banner, as usual" (*Banner* January 24, 1874).

The spirits who spoke through the medium were often struck themselves by the strangeness, or rather, *strangerness*, of this genre. The spirits habitually address the medium or chairman as "stranger" and reflect on how strange it is that they, who seek to communicate privately with friends and loved ones, are forced to do this in public, through strangers, as if writing a letter to the editor to contact an old friend. One spirit, a certain recently deceased Union soldier named Oliver Plimpton, is like many spirits in that he begins by commenting on the general strangeness of this situation ("I'm well, and then I ain't well, for I feel mighty sort of strange here"), particularly that he has lost his body "and borrowed another one" and is "rigged up in a female uniform for the occasion" (referring to speaking through the female body of the trance medium). Then he gets to his business: "Now, stranger, what I want to do is send some kind of message or letter to my wife." The chairman replies: "If you give us your wife's address, we will print your letter in our paper, and send it to her" (*Banner* May 3, 1862). Other spirits also constantly comment on the strangeness of talking intimately through strangers. A certain erstwhile Mary Ann Richards of Asheville North Carolina, says: "I feel, though I have spoken to strangers, in a strange place, that my words will not rest here; they will be scattered abroad and reach those who are kindred to myself" (*Banner* January 20, 1877).

These spirits are often reticent to speak in public, before strangers. They dwell on the fact that at these seances, they are strangers among strangers. Charles Clark, lately of Boston, introduces himself thus: "You don't know me, do you? Well, I don't know you. I came to see you because I wanted to, and because I want to talk to my father, too. Do you know my father?" At the same séance, Anna Maria Groton, formerly of New Hampshire, after telling her story, underlines that both the living and the other spirits that surround her here are all strangers: "But you are a stranger to me, and so are all these spirits here." After identifying themselves and those they wish to contact, they sometimes reflect on the ghostly aphasia that makes it impossible to speak directly to their own erstwhile intimates, who cannot, or will not, hear them: "I come, to a stranger, and through a stranger, *that I may carry conviction to those who will not hear me*" (All from *Banner* May 14, 1857, original emphasis). They talk often of their inability to contact their loved ones privately and indicate their reluctance to speak at a public séance, in front of strangers. They do so as a last resort with the hope that their loved ones will engage a private medium so they can have a private séance to say their piece. For example, the late John Whitney writes:

I have tried for the last two years to communicate with my friends, but it is unavailing. I cannot reach them. It matters not what I do, it matters not what I say; speak I ever so loudly, work I ever so strongly, I don't reach them, and as a last resort I have visited this public circle. I am well aware this is a public post-office, and that my friends will not like to see a letter from me, yet I come here today, and if they will meet me at any medium's house, no matter how obscure, nor matter how public, or if they will call upon Charles H. Foster I will be there, and will tell them why I came here today. My name is John Whitney. I passed away about three years ago in Philadelphia. (*Banner*, April 14, 1877)

Mary A. Bennett.

Will you please say that Mary A. Bennett, from Benton, Missouri, has returned to make herself known to her friends? It has been a long journey, sir. I should have felt that I could not take so long a journey when I was in the form, but I was told that it would not take me long to come, and having a desire to know something of this thing and how it worked, I came the best I knew how. It did n't take me long to come. It seems so strange! Do many strangers come here to your post-office, sir? [Oh, yes.] Then I am not unwelcome. I do n't like to go where I am not wanted. I desire to feel welcome wherever I go. I do n't know much about what you call the spirit-world, for I've not been here but a few weeks. I met a friend of mine here, whom I used to know many years ago, who took me by the hand and said to me, "You had better go with me." And I found such a crowd here, sir, it almost frightened me, but I was told that all I had to do was to sit down in the chair, and this thing [the medium], this machine, or whatever you call it, would do the talking for me. I am trying to do the best I know how. Say to 'em I would like to know more of this, and understand it better, and I'd like to communicate with them. I was nearly sixty-six years old. Good-day, sir. I am much obliged to you.

Figure 6. Letter from Mary Bennet (*Banner*, January 6, 1877)

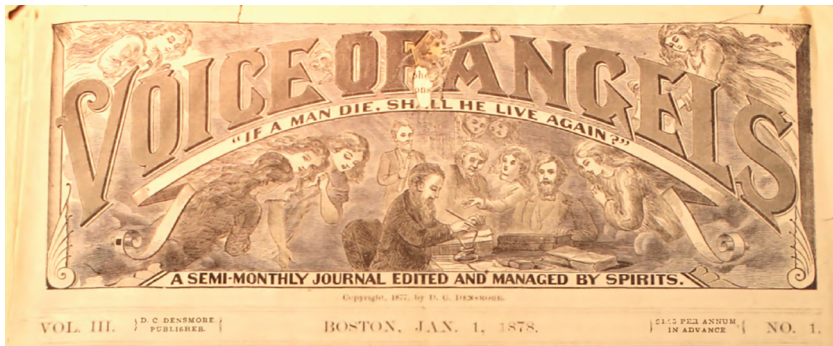


Figure 7. Masthead of the first issue of *Voice of Angels* in 1878

As this example shows, by the late 1870s these spirits not only use postal genres like letters to describe their communications, they begin to speak explicitly of the message department as the “public or general post office for spirits.” Here again spiritualist genres parallel massive changes in the organization of public life around key communication infrastructures in this period. As Henkin explores in detail, in this period the post office became “paradigmatic sites of public life. . . . [w]here letters, correspondents, and expectant users of the network all came into contact” (2008, 64). Thus, the *Banner* transformed the public free séances held in its editorial offices into new node of the spiritualist postal infrastructure, a “spirit post office.” A certain dearly departed William H. Ingle announces “I have a short letter I would like to put into your post-office, if it is agreeable to you. It does not amount to much, but then I would like to report myself as safely over on this side” (*Banner* March 10, 1877). Some spirits want to know whether they have come to the right place, the late Major Daniel Scully asks “This, I understand, sir, is the general post-office, is it not?” The séance chairman replies: “It is, for you spirits” (*Banner* February 10, 1877). Another spirit, a certain deceased Mike Murphy, wants to know how far this spirit postal network extends, he asks: “Does your post-office reach everywhere, sir? Does it go to New York City? [Yes.] Does it go to Philadelphia? [Yes.] Then I’m all right” (*Banner* June 16, 1877). The message department then, is a public séance that acts as a kind of post office, whereby spirits can seek out their loved ones in a world of strangers, in a manner akin to missed connection ads in a contemporary newspaper, fishing in the public pond for a private contact. One prim, old-fashioned spirit, Mary A. Bennet, from Benton, Missouri, expresses a certain demure feminine fear of the crowds in the spirit post office and the new-fangled talking

machine (that spirits treat human mediums as nonhuman machines is a spiritualist commonplace) (fig. 6).

Eventually this entanglement or conflation of séance and editorial office reached its logical culmination with the newspaper *Voice of Angels*, which was the first, and perhaps only, spiritualist newspaper that was written, edited and published by departed spirits (1878) (fig. 7).

To conclude, such public print séances opened contact between the living and the dead through the necessary and normative mediation of strangers. But they were always intended to be confirmed by other letters to the editor or by private séances that allow the dead to speak privately with their loved ones. Spiritualism is all about strangers: some living, some dead. In the domestic séance, the list of living guests normally contained strangers, and contacts between familiars estranged by death were always mediated by the agency of other strangers, the medium and her band of control spirits (Manning 2018), in a manner that Jill Galvan (2010, 2012) usefully compares to a spiritual switchboard or telegraph office (see also Hales 2019 for parallel contemporary “digitally mediated intimacies”). Similarly, the public print séances in the Message Department, the Spirit Post Office, are explicitly modeled on the postal system, an infrastructural system requiring the necessary and normative public mediation of a whole series of strangers (including spirits, mediums, editors and postal workers) standing between the dead and their living friends and relatives.

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