Techno-Religious Imaginaries: On the Spiritual Telegraph and the Circum-Atlantic World of the 19th Century

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PREFACE

This paper by Jeremy Stolow continues some of the research and discussion in the Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition (McMaster University) Working Paper Series about the history of globalization. This history is important because it permits us to assess and understand better what is novel about the contemporary period of globalization and what is more continuous with the past. A critical issue here is the relative importance of contemporary information and communication technologies in reshaping social relations and permitting their global extension in the contemporary period. Professor Stolow's paper reminds us that information and communication technologies began to foster important changes in social relations and in the imagining of these relations already in the nineteenth century. Of particular importance here was the introduction of the telegraph, a technology that permitted much more rapid communication across the world, especially after trans-oceanic cables were laid for its use.

In his paper, he examines the relationship between these technologies and the growth of an important, trans-Atlantic religious movement focused on the spiritual telegraph. He shows that the technology had an important impact on popular culture, leading to its being incorporated into new forms of sociability, particularly religious ones. He adds that these new forms of sociability incorporated ideas related to the telegraph, reshaping in turn religious practices and the range and composition of religious communities. More generally, Stolow suggests, the telegraph was an example of the impact of electricity and its vast potentials for use, its flowing character, and its invisibility on the popular imagination. He reminds us that new technologies are always embedded in particular sets of social relationships and that these relationships, in turn, will change as this incorporation takes place.

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Religion, Technology and Autonomy under the Sign of Globalization

Whether looking at matters of invention and design, of distribution and ownership, or of reception and use, popular histories of technology are typically framed within one of two meta-narratives: the optimistic or the dystopian. In the former case, technologies are seen as benign instruments that fulfill the needs, intentions, and desires of their human users. An extreme form of such technophilia can be found in the pages of the American magazine *Wired*, and among techno-gurus such as Nicholas Negroponte, who wax poetic about an imminent world populated by therapeutic Barbie dolls, self-cleaning shirts, driverless cars, and a range of devices enabling immediate access to inexhaustible supplies of media and information. This optimism has a considerable progeny, one root of which might be traced back to early modern European conceptions of the mechanical order of nature, and its susceptibility to ever-advancing human powers of inspection and rational design. In this tradition, technology is a pliable handmaiden to the forward march of history, taking such forms as the Haussmannized city, the Macadamized countryside, the prosthetically enhanced body, or the digitized archive. On the other hand, there is a tradition of thinking about technology, such as one finds in the philosophical writings of Martin Heidegger or Jacques Ellul, which is both dystopian and technophobic. Here one is presented with a vision of technology as an autonomous, self-directed realm, indifferent and impervious to our feeble calls for restraint, democratic control, or humane purpose. In this scheme, modern technologies resemble juggernauts running loose in the world, devouring the natural environment, and even human bodies, and transforming them into raw materials for their own mechanical processes.

In this paper, I do not seek to resolve the ongoing dispute between optimistic and dystopian accounts of technology, nor shall I attempt to offer a "better" theoretical construction of what technology is, and how it relates to the making of history.[1] I am concerned with a somewhat different set of questions, which are based on the observation that both the optimistic and the dystopian narratives of technological modernization share a common location in a deeper — and thus more insidious — history of secularist thinking about the relationship between humans and things, between the lived body and the realm of imagination, and between the known and the unknown.[2] From a secular perspective, technology refers to the order of things that are "supposed to work," and the failure of any given technology to do so is usually attributed to problems of misapplication or errors of design. Religion, on the other hand, is often defined as precisely that which is *not* supposed to work, at least, in the sense that actions and perceptions falling under the rubric of religion are assumed not to produce any objectively measurable effects within the order of the real. In the anticlerical tradition of the Enlightened *philosophes*, this distinction further serves as the basis for understanding the "true" origin of religious phenomena, such as miracles or divine retributions, as products of wholly human thoughts and actions. Attempts to define what is religion (and in the same breath to demarcate the realm of the secular) thus end up working to delegitimate or de-authenticate religious practices and modes of discourse, by presenting them as infantile delusions, or as tricks of mystification designed to exploit the credulities of the innocent. On such terms, the Enlightenment critique of religion has long been tied to a broader political project to foster new, "reasonable" forms of religious discourse and practice: religions that "know their place," by

remaining safely segregated from the performative, epistemological, and instrumental prerogatives of — among other things — modern techno-scientific practice.[3]

Central to the Enlightenment critique of religion, therefore, is its certainty about the division between a real and an unreal world, and consequently, its legacy of construing religious powers and beliefs in terms of their functional status for social life. This legacy is intimately related to secularist assumptions about technology and its place within the social and natural order of things. As such, even if they are not always acknowledged, Enlightened ideas about religion and secularism also lie at the heart of much talk about the contemporary moment of so-called globalization. Representatives of disparate ideological, philosophical, and methodological schools — including modernization theorists, dependency theorists, world-systems theorists, or proponents of the "clash of civilizations" thesis — debate numerous issues concerning the origins, the causes, the extensities and intensities, and the consequences of economic and political forces of globalization. But one unfortunately tenacious assumption throughout these debates is that "religious" modes of discourse and practice are somehow incompatible with the habits and ways of seeing the world that are said to accompany technological modernization. And nowhere are "religion" and "modernity" more dramatically counterpoised with one another than at the points where advanced technologies (such as those relating to communication or human fertility) make their appearance in the world as "globalizing" forces.

Enlightenment attitudes toward religious subjectivity have also played a key role in the formation of liberal ideas about autonomy, and have contributed to their self-evidentiary status in modern social discourse. As a principle of self-determination or self-rule (whether the unit of analysis is a single person, a community, an organization, or a nation-state), autonomy is usually understood as a metric of social achievement: a normative standpoint or a performative ideal, against which constraining conditions (of political domination, economic or social privation, or indeed, even of self-repression) can be measured. In the liberal tradition of political and social philosophy, the autonomous individual is typically defined as a subject in possession of the requisite knowledge, cognitive and emotional capacities, bodily control, and location within the social and material conditions that will enable him/her — at least in principle — to realize an equitable and just, secure, and socially enriched life. Within this scheme, technology is treated either as a vehicle for the realization, enhancement, or maintenance of autonomy, or conversely, as that which threatens, retards, or undermines one's ability to become and remain autonomous. Either way, the implicit assumption about the essentially secular (and contagiously secularizing) character of technology itself remains more or less intact.

But the more carefully one looks into these matters, the more difficult it becomes to determine where, or even how, to draw the line dividing technology from religion. For one thing, modern technologies (especially advanced, complex systems that require considerable operational expertise and institutional infrastructure) are often marked precisely by their inability to be fully captured by the instrumental intentions of their users. To that extent, not only are technical actions experienced as arbitrary and irrational processes, they also seem to participate in a transcendental realm, very much like that other category of actions normally located under the rubric of "religion." Technologically-mediated systems of communication and action possess properties of automaticity, self-referentiality, reproducibility, and velocity that are phenomenologically comparable with "religious" experiences of the numinous, the miraculous, the providential, or the mysterious. And, as numerous historical and ethnographic studies have shown, the skilled techniques and representational systems of modern techno-scientific practice — in laboratories and workshops, at conferences, and in other public and institutional spaces — often resemble systems of magic or religious action: the pragmatic engagement with the world through skilled techniques, disciplined perceptions, and autotelic mechanical devices; and the social organization of "faith" regarding the true workings of an imperceptible natural order.[4] All of this suggests that religion and technology are far more tightly woven together than Enlightenment discourse might have us believe. It would also seem to follow that the overlap of religion and technology as two

dimensions of a shared realm of discourse and practice informs the way we choose to define the search for collective and individual forms of autonomy — and also the way we might identify the impediments to such goals — in the technologically-infused landscape of the global present.

I hope to shed some light on these intimacies of religion, technology, and globalization by considering an "exemplary story."[5] This story takes place in the latter half of the nineteenth century, a period of intense technological transformation, and also of dramatic growth of religious movements. The succession of inventions that came to fore in the latter half of the nineteenth century radically expanded the terms of human contact, labour, knowledge, and imagination along the axes of transmission and recording: new technologies for erasing distance (such as telegraphy, telephony, and radio), and new forms of mechanized inscription and reproduction (such as photography, phonography, radiography, and cinema). These revolutions in mediated communication had deep and globally extensive repercussions, animating such diverse phenomena as the setting of new standards for measuring world time and space, an increasingly bureaucratic mode of capital accumulation, the ideal of "objectivity" in journalism and other professions, the consolidation of new, gendered distinctions between private and public, or the success of new popular cultural forms.[6] At the same time, the nineteenth century set the stage for a dramatic restructuring and flourishing of religious activity, coincident with modern (predominantly European) projects of nation-state formation and the expansion of colonial empires and with the adoption of new organizational formats designed to exert influence "among the masses." Here one might consider the examples of newly formed religious associations with considerable transnational reach, such as the London Missionary Society (founded in 1795) or the American Bible Society (founded in 1816), which deftly availed themselves of opportunities provided by European imperial expansion, as well as new technologies of transportation and communication, to propagate their vision of global space as a unitary mission field. In turn, Protestant movements contributed decisively to extension and intensification of globalizing networks and processes, translating and distributing Bibles and other religious pamphlets and tracts, building schools, raising funds, advocating for legal reforms (such as temperance or women's suffrage), and conducting numerous campaigns to end slavery, to stamp out "heathen" custom (such as the practice of sati in India), and to save souls, wherever roads, ships, and new media technologies could take them in Europe, Africa, Asia, the Americas, and other, more far-flung locales (see, *inter alia*, Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Ward 1992; Wosh 1994; van der Veer 1996). And what might be said about the increasingly globalizing reach and influence of nineteenth century Protestant movements might also be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to others within this rapidly changing field, including Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, and others whose self-identity was now reflected in the global marketplace of religious ideas, practices, and modes of affinity.[7]

While many have noted the historical coincidence of the media revolutions and the flourishing of religious movements in the nineteenth century, few have seized the opportunity to develop rigorous theoretical conclusions about this conjuncture. In this paper, I offer a modest contribution to such work, by considering the case of the Spiritual Telegraph. This term refers to the deep and inextricable relationship between, on the one hand, the circulation of ideas and practices of spirit communication, embodied in the nineteenth century religious movement known as Spiritualism, and on the other hand, the institution and spread of the telegraph: a technology which can be singled out as the first significant industrial application of electricity in the nineteenth century, and an important harbinger of the networks of global communication that define our contemporary "digital age."

Spiritualism is centred around the practice of communication with the dead (typically, through the dramaturgy of possessed bodies, and mysterious appearances of disincarnate voices, images, and other sensations), and with the various benefits accrued from such communications, including personal solace, health, prestige, and even the authority to undertake moral or political campaigns in the public sphere. The term in fact encompasses a family of movements — Victorian (i.e., American, British, and

Canadian) Spiritualism, Theosophy, French, Brazilian and Cuban Spiritism (i.e., Kardecism), and Christian Science, to name the most obvious — which emerged in the mid-to late-nineteenth century and which have survived in myriad forms into the present. These groupings spread around the Atlantic, and eventually found their way into every region of the world, from Russia to the Philippines, to India and Australia, among other places. As a globally-resonant cultural force, Spiritualism provided a canopy for a wide range of adherents, drawing in literally millions of working-class women and men,[8] as well as social elites, including doctors, artists, scientists, politicians, and engineers, who lent an aura of respectability and authority to the cause.[9] One thing that sets Spiritualism apart from other religious movements of the nineteenth century was its uniquely intense involvement in the cultural, scientific, and economic transformations responsible for the rise of "Western" modernity. As we shall see in the coming pages, Spiritualism was distinctive for having developed a vocabulary for making sense of the ascendant technologies of nineteenth century industry and communication, and a repertoire of ritual activities designed specifically to accommodate the performative demands such technologies elicited in various contexts of private and public life. For these reasons, Spiritualism must be understood, not only in terms of its ideas about the world of spirit, but also its deep entanglement with the history of technological development, and in particular with the world-transforming technologies of communication that made their appearance in the latter half of the nineteenth century, beginning with the telegraph.

The conjunction of Spiritualism and telegraphy thus tells a story about the cultural reception and social consequences of an emerging technology: how it was inculcated into daily habits, and how its powers and its disciplining effects were related to the production of new forms of sociability and subjectivity. As such, the Spiritual Telegraph contributes to our understanding of the historical reception of "new media," wherein diverse social groups confront the auratic power of new technologies, among other things, as signs of modernity itself. But as I hope to show in the coming pages, this story is not simply of antiquarian interest. It also has much to offer for our current thinking about the triangulation of religion-technology-autonomy, inviting us to revisit some of the key assumptions we tend to make about how these terms relate to one another, and also how they relate to larger social transformations gathered under the sign of globalization.

Circum-Atlantic Spirit

The creation myth of the Spiritualist movement was staged in the modest home of the Fox family, outside Rochester, New York, where for several weeks during the spring of 1848 there was a nightly performance of inexplicable and unrelenting rapping sounds. Over time, the young Fox daughters Kate and Margaretta began to recognize patterns in the noises, and eventually established a rapport with their preternatural visitor: as it turned out, the spirit of a peddler who had been murdered by a former occupant of the house. Their communications were based on a system of rappings not unlike the code Samuel Morse had devised for his electrical telegraph,[10] an instrument which had been introduced to the American public only four years earlier, and which was already beginning to turn the town of Rochester into a crucial hub in the expanding communications network of the American interior. News of the Fox sisters' discovery spread quickly — from America to Britain, France and Germany, and then back across the Atlantic to various New World locales — turning the women into veritable media stars, and lending considerable momentum to a renewed fascination with the spirit world and its secrets.

Of course, creation myths do not do much justice to the complexities of historical origins, lines of influence, or regional variations, but the example of the Rochester Rappings does provide a wonderful illustration of what made Spiritualism a potent cultural force in the latter half of the nineteenth century: the fertile intersection of popular religiosity — more properly stated, a predominantly feminine religiosity — and an expanding public culture made possible through new communications media; the capacity of spirit mediums to renegotiate existing lines of (cultural,

scientific, ecclesiastical and political) authority and sources of legitimate knowledge, and to link such efforts on a worldwide scale; and the power of a new technology to provide both the metaphorical language and the material infrastructure for sustaining contact with a "world beyond" the local everyday life situations of relatively powerless people. The story of the Fox sisters' rise to international fame also highlights how Spiritualism was a pioneering movement in its embrace of new organizational forms and techniques within the religious field. Its development did not depend on the establishment of a circle of virtuosi (such as priests or hierocrats) who monopolized religious knowledge, or who guarded the portals of access to ritual practice, and who derived their authority from routinized exchanges of money, gifts, and services with "ordinary" folk. Rather, Spiritualism was very much a "do-it-yourself" movement: a network of like-minded actors who established their own local circles largely on the basis of information acquired from the popular press, which for its part was experiencing a dramatic expansion through the introduction of steam presses and industrial paper-making techniques, and the use of electrical telegraphy for rapid news reportage. These were the terms on which the nineteenth century bore witness to a startling multiplication of Spiritualist seance circles, periodical publications, national and international conferences, scientific committees of investigation, and no small number of fraudulent opportunists, sceptical critics, and curious onlookers.

Spiritualism has been the object of intense scholarly interest in recent years, the movement having been cited for its influence on such disparate phenomena as the birth of psychoanalysis, the rise of first-wave feminism, or the entrenchment of various forms of popular and high culture, from poetry to stage hypnosis to cinema-going.[11] This scholarship has shown how Spiritualism was the product of a multiplicity of overlapping philosophical legacies, with varying degrees of accommodation to established Christian doctrines, and drawing upon mystical traditions both from within and outside Europe and the North Atlantic world.[12] Many have also dwelled on the significance of Spiritualism as a predominantly women's movement, not unlike many other forms of popular religious activity in the nineteenth century. In fact, Spirit mediums — the indispensable technicians in the control of access to the supernatural world — were overwhelmingly women, and mediumship in general was culturally coded as a "female gift."[13] Scholars have thus argued that Spiritualism provided women with opportunities for social advancement and public legitimacy through their participation in seance practice, and more broadly, the social networks that such associations opened up for them. Making artful use of widespread nineteenth century tropes of moral purity, and assumptions about the sensitive nature of "the weaker sex," Spiritualist women were able to speak out while at the same time avoid the responsibilities of authorship, proclaiming merely to convey the judgments of the world of spirit upon the world of the living. This placed the authority of dead voices in alliance with the desires of Spiritualist women to make themselves heard and, indeed, to remake the world, not least through their involvement in political movements advocating the abolition of slavery, temperance, or women's suffrage.[14]

Because Spiritualists were concerned above all to cultivate a direct union with the world of the dead, spirit mediumship has also been treated as a variant of a much larger family of religious practices concerned with possession, spiritual healing, and supernatural communication, known to societies around the world.[15] At the same time, however, as other studies have emphasized, the comparison of Spiritualism with "non-Western" rituals of possession is complicated by the former's intense engagement with a range of "Western" sciences and para-sciences, from physics to phrenology, and also with the theoretical and practical frameworks of emerging professions, such as electrical engineering and psychology. The seemingly omnivorous character of the movement suggests that Spiritualism cannot readily be contained within the simple binarisms of religious/secular, modern/primitive, erudite/popular, or scientific/magical. Moreover, Spiritualism's liminal position provides us with a particularly instructive vantage point from which to survey the dramatic cultural changes that accompanied broader processes of industrialization, colonial encounter, and the formation of new national and international public spheres over the course of the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Unfortunately, however, much of the literature on Spiritualism has been imprisoned within a parochial framework, geographically coincident with the history of discrete nation-states, and in particular, accounts of the movement in England, the United States, or France. It is necessary to challenge this bias and contest the conclusions that have been drawn therefrom. In the first instance, we must acknowledge the extent to which Spiritualism functioned as a sort of "travelling theory," propelled along and productively transformed through a series of transnational trajectories and routes, such as those linking France and England; England, Canada, and the United States; England, the United States, and the Caribbean; France and Brazil; and so on. An examination of Spiritualism's rapid spread along these routes makes it clear that the proper scale of analysis is not national, but transnational, if not global. More precisely, I propose that Spiritualism is most productively analysed by locating it within the shifting social spaces, contact zones, and fractal patterns of economic exchange and cultural hybridization that make up what I shall here call the "circum-Atlantic world" of the nineteenth century.[16]

This analytic move follows in the footsteps of a growing number of scholars who, by taking the Atlantic as a single, distinctive site, have been busily rewriting the institutionalized historical narratives of Old World and New, and finding new ways to move beyond the politically charged language of discovery and conquest, or for that matter, of modernization and technology transfer. Of course, the Atlantic world has long been understood as a site of key cultural, economic, and political transactions crucial to the formation of the modern world: the fateful encounters between European explorers and "New World" empires (such as the Aztec or the Inca); the slave trade and the establishment of plantation economies; the staging of colonial rebellions that ushered in the age of modern nationalisms; or the migration of millions of European peasants and working classes in search of a New Jerusalem. The Atlantic has also been foregrounded as an important arena of cultural and intellectual exchange, as shown by studies of transatlantic connections among cosmopolitan political reformers, social engineers, abolitionists, suffragists, socialists, romantics, scientists, evangelicals, artists, and entertainers.[17] More recent scholarship in Atlantic studies has pushed the conceptual frontiers of the Atlantic world as a site of investigation, with the aim of challenging facile assumptions about the normativity of European and North Atlantic — that is to say, the "Western" — experiences of technological, economic and political modernization, or the universality of the cultural resources available for making such changes meaningful.[18]

The Atlantic world is also a privileged site for tracking the confluence of economic, political, and cultural forces that are normally identified with the formation of the modern world system. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Atlantic had in fact become the undisputed central arena of global economic exchange, and the core of an industrial system dominated by Britain's empire (see Bayart 2004; McNeill 1992). Moreover, this development cannot be disentangled from the evolution and synergetic integration of technological systems of steam power, railway lines, and telegraph cables, which spread rapidly across and around the circumference of the Atlantic — and well beyond it — during the second half of the nineteenth century. Technologies of steam, rail, and electrical telegraphy together formed an architecture unprecedented in its capacity to contract space and time, transplant populations, extract resources, and supply markets, constituting what is arguably the key prototype of our contemporary age of economic and communicational globalization.

By placing the history of Spiritualism within this circum-Atlantic framework, one throws into sharper relief how this movement reflected broader processes of globalization in the nineteenth century, and also how Spiritualism worked to translate the forces of technological, economic, and cultural modernization into locally meaningful discourses and performative repertoires of conduct in public and private life. Only a transnational perspective can show us how, and with what effects, did news of Spiritualist activity circulate around the Atlantic (to say nothing of the peripatetic movements of many Spiritualist mediums, advocates, and supporting figures). This transnational framework is also needed in order to explain how the image of the Atlantic, and more broadly still, the image of global space itself,

figured within the Spiritualist imagination. Nowhere is this more colourfully illustrated than in the many cases of seance practitioners who, from their location in bourgeois living rooms of Western metropolises, summoned spirits representing a diversity of "other worlds," and subjected themselves to the authority of these exotic voices. A survey of articles, notices, and letters published in *La Revue Spirite* (the leading French Spiritualist journal of the nineteenth century, which enjoyed a wide international readership) gives one a sense of how frequently mid-nineteenth century mediums received visitations, not only from the spirits of great figures from the pantheon of Western history (such as Socrates, Julius Caesar, Mozart, Goethe, Charlemagne, Rousseau, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Abraham Lincoln, or Jeanne D'Arc), but also from a startling array of more exotic spirits: "Hitoti, a savage chief from Tahiti," "Manouza, a woman from Baghdad," "a young peasant girl from Algeria," "a black slave from Louisiana," "a doctor from Russia," "a Queen from Delhi," "a pasha from Egypt" or "a widow from Malabar," among many others.[19] The seance chamber, it seems, was not only a place of congregation, but also a site for opening up fertile avenues of dialogue and symbolic exchange across and beyond what Peter van der Veer (2001) has termed "the colonial divide." Thus was Spiritualism deeply implicated in a new mode of imagining community, commensurate with the spread of Spiritualist networks around the Atlantic world in particular, and also through evolving representations of world community — both living and dead — made possible through the fertile conjunctions of seance practice, print literacy, and the compression of time and space through new technologies of transportation and communication.

Consider the case of Spiritism, the variant of Spiritualism which first blossomed in France in the late 1850s, and which was eventually transplanted to various New World locations, most notably Brazil, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, during the late nineteenth century. Allan Kardec (the *nom de plume* of Léon Dénizarth Hippolyte Rivail, 1804-1869) was a Mesmerist, educational theorist, and chief architect of the Spiritist tradition in France. Starting with his first major publication, *Le Livre des esprits* (1856-7), based on a series of trance communications, Kardec played a leading role in the authentication of Spiritualist knowledge and its dissemination across Western Europe and around the Atlantic, in particular by providing a patina of scientific respectability to long-standing popular interpretations of New Testament teachings about the eternal soul, and popular practices of somnambulism and clairvoyance. Kardec's theories resonated among various social groups, including members of the French and Spanish bourgeoisie who were disaffected with official Catholic dogmas concerning death and the afterlife, and, most strikingly, large numbers of artists, intellectuals, and what Benedict Anderson (1991) would refer to as "pilgrim bureaucrats," who had come to Paris from across the Atlantic world for education and training in administration or civil engineering. Through such carriers, Kardec's doctrine of Spiritism was brought back to the New World, and there it was fruitfully combined with rituals of possession and other religious practices originating from West Africa, giving birth to entirely new, "syncretic" religions, such as such as Umbanda (in Brazil) and Santaría (in Cuba and Puerto Rico).[20]

Much of the literature on Kardecism fits well within a larger historical narrative about patterns of "creolization" of European religious and scientific texts and African performative traditions, and their productive agency within New World localities, which can be traced back to the eighteenth century, if not further.[21] What has received much less attention, however, are the material, institutional and communicational infrastructures that actually enabled Kardec's ideas to germinate, and to take root in diverse locales of the Atlantic World. In other words, Kardec should be not be regarded simply as a philosophical exponent of Spiritualism, and not only as a collector and interpreter of knowledge about the sprit world culled from a variety of "primitive" sources. And Kardec's ideas, for that matter, should not simply be regarded as raw material that was "transplanted" from the Old World to the New. We are better served by treating Kardec in terms of his position as the manager of a major literary enterprise, an epistolary correspondent, and as a metropolitan (Parisian) intellectual, located at the intersection of a rapidly thickening network of communicative lines extending around the circumference of the Atlantic.

In this regard, it is no accident that the most influential vehicle through which Kardec propagated his theories took the form of a periodical publication, the aforementioned *La Revue Spirite*, which he founded in 1858. In fact, Kardec's project to collect, document, and classify stories about spirit communication cannot be disentangled from the conditions of rapid expansion of the capacities for serial publication in the mid-to late-nineteenth century. The journal also provided the concrete conditions of mediation for Kardec's efforts to formulate protocols for the organization and functioning of local Spiritist chapters around the world, and it was through his journal that he maintained contact with corresponding Spiritualist societies in such diverse locales as Mexico City, Havana, Rio de Janeiro, Algiers, and Vienna.

As the example of Kardecism shows, the history of Spiritualism's spread around and across the Atlantic world — through texts, travellers, news reportage, and rumours — was inextricably linked with the history of expanding technologies and practices of transportation and mediated communication during the same period. In this latter regard, it would be impossible to overlook the crucial role played by telegraphy, a key technology in the re-ordering of the Atlantic world in the mid-to late-nineteenth century, dramatized by the successful laying of submarine cables connecting England, Ireland, Canada, and the United States in 1866, and with subsequent links to the Caribbean and Latin America in the 1870s, and much of the West African coast in the 1880s-90s. In the words of one (perhaps overly-excited) contemporary observer, thanks to submarine telegraphy, "the breadth of the Atlantic, with all its waves, is as nothing" (quoted in Standage 1998, 90). This "nothingness," as we shall see, lies at the heart of Spiritualism's and telegraphy's conjoined histories.

Wired World

The most revolutionary of the new media technologies of the nineteenth century was arguably the telegraph.[22] This is because, as James Carey proposes in his widely cited work on the topic (1989, 203-4), with the advent of Samuel Morse's electrical telegraph in 1844, communication was for the first time "freed from the constraints of geography." Thanks to telegraphy, information transmission could now proceed much faster than physical transportation, and on this basis could redefine long-standing spatio-temporal relations of centre and periphery, the global and the local, or the proximate and the distant. Of course, no technology is created *ex nihilo*, and in this respect it is important to recall that electrical telegraphy was preceded by a variety of techniques and instruments for what we might here call "deterritorialized" communication, such as semaphores and optical telegraph systems (Beauchamp 2001, 3-19; Standage 1998, 6-20), to say nothing of the quite ancient practices of sending signals by smoke and mirrors. But the electric telegraph involved a far more radical separation of signifying systems from the physical movement of objects, engendering entirely new possibilities for social relations based on the "economy of the signal" (Carey 1989, 202). These were relations predicated on (relative) simultaneity, impersonal contact and increasingly centralized administrative control, as was quickly made evident in a variety of economic, technical, and social arenas: the coordination of capital investments and strategic transactions in international commodity markets (Carey 1989, 205-7, 212-222); the standardization of news reportage (Blondheim 1994a); shifts in modes of international diplomacy (Headrick 1991, 73-92; Nickles 2003); and even new possibilities for romance, fantasy, or criminal enterprise (Standage 1998,128-144).

As the first successful application of electrical energy outside the realms of scientific experiment and medical therapy, telegraphy constituted what we might even be tempted to call the world's first truly globalizing telecommunications infrastructure, not least because of the systemic nature of its technical application. Telegraphic communication was characterized by its capacity for rapid, unidirectional and asynchronous transmissions of information across potentially limitless distances, thanks to its innovative use of integrated electrical circuitry, and its ability to compress complex language through the use of a binary system of signs (Morse code). The electric telegraph was also distinguished by the

restrictive interface between the medium and its end-users, materialized in the institutional space of the telegraph office, its bureaucratized labour force, and its hierarchical ordering of communication processes according to criteria of efficient time management and priorities of commercial and governmental interest.[23] In all these respects, this technology represented a significant harbinger of the contemporary global communications environment, with its proliferating networks of computers and satellites, and the institutional architecture governing transnational flows of digital information (as described, for example, by Castells 1996). Even the legal instruments designed specifically for telegraphy foreshadowed our contemporary era of global media flows. The most important prototype for international telecommunications policy, and interstate coordination, emerged with the founding of the International Telegraph Union in 1865. This pioneering institution was created in order to standardize equipment and operating practices of telegraph coding, transcription and transmission, to facilitate interconnection of national networks, and to ensure common rules for the collection of international tariffs. The telegraph not only demanded new forms of cooperation among states, it also contributed to a dramatic transformation in the exercise of political power within and across state structures, such as by drawing peripheral regions of the world into evermore intimate contact with capital cities, and especially the great imperial metropoles of Europe and the United States (Beauchamp 2001, 102-133; Headrick 1991, 50-72).[24] In short, through the networking of regional, national, and international telegraph systems, the design of the human-machine interface, and the organization of institutional environments for these communicative practices, telegraphy stood at the forefront of a radical revolution in mediated communication, with global consequences.

The story of the telegraph's rapid extension is well known. In 1848, only four years after Morse successfully introduced the technology, there were already 2,000 miles of wire in existence. By the early 1870s, there were over 650,000 miles of wire linking together a sprawling network of telegraph offices, submarine cables, international connection treaties, ancillary technologies (such as pneumatic tubes), and messenger boys (who hand-delivered messages wherever cables did not exist), in their conjunction servicing over 20,000 towns and villages in a vast area of the world from Europe to America, to India and Japan, Australia and South America (Beauchamp 2001, 134-180; Headrick 1988, 97-126; Standage 1998, 58-9, 61-2, 96-102). By the dawn of the twentieth century, the technology had enveloped even the most remote hinterlands of the world.[25] This relentless expansion was dominated by British-owned cabling companies, which benefited from British hegemony in related fields, including marine traffic, and control of the trade in gutta percha (an early form of rubber crucial for submarine cable construction), facilitating the formation of vast international telecommunications concerns, such as the Electric Telegraph Company (founded in 1846), the Submarine Telegraph Company (formed in 1850), the Eastern Telegraph Company (formed in 1872, which rapidly grew into the largest cable operating company in the world), the Africa Direct Telegraph Company (formed in 1885, linking England with its colonies on the West African coast), the British Indian Extension Telegraph Company (which linked Aden, Suez, Bombay, Madras, Penang, and Singapore), and the British-Australian Telegraph Company. While British cabling companies dominated the international scene, their efforts were rivalled by a wide range of players, including American companies (most importantly, Western Union, founded in Rochester in 1851), and other international business ventures, such as the International Ocean Telegraph Company (linking Florida with various Caribbean cities), the Danish-Russian Telegraph Company (linking Scandinavia and Russia), the West African Telegraph Company (linking France, Portugal, and Spain with Senegal and Guinea), the Société du Câble Transatlantique Française (linking France and the United States in 1869), as well as numerous state-owned initiatives, by the governments of France, Spain, Prussia, Denmark, Sweden, Greece, and the Ottoman Empire, among others.[26]

As networks of telegraph cables encompassed the globe, drawing all regions into the orbit of this new, global communications system (although, we should concede, with quite uneven levels of access and control), telegraphy contributed decisively to the formation of a new, supraterritorial social space,

existing everywhere and nowhere. This new geography was defined by the logic of "the grid," which did not respect long-standing temporal frontiers of day and night, or work-week and Sabbath, or other ways of marking time locally, and worked instead to impose upon the entire planet a single, temporally homogeneous map of world space, reflected (among other things) in the development of standardized time zones.[27] Telegraphy was thus implicated in a new mode of representation of both global time and space. This is exemplified by the simultaneous growth of the submarine telegraph industry and the scientific disciplines of oceanography and hydrography, which were fed by a shared desire for reliable and detailed knowledge about the ocean floor (Rozwadowski 2001). Indeed, beginning in the 1850s and 60s, rapid innovations in deep-sea sounding technologies helped to transform the seabed of the Atlantic from an unknown (and largely unconsidered) entity into a new frontier: an uncivilized space, ripe for conquest and exploitation. In sum, even though its potential remained only partially realized, forever plagued by financial and technical impediments, telegraphy promised a new alignment of knowledge, representation, and communicative practice, encompassing the entire planet, from the most temporally remote locales of human habitation to the darkest corners of the natural order.

This emergent globality was the great product of electrical engineering in the nineteenth century, and with it, the technological capacities, not just for relatively instantaneous, but more specifically, *disembodied* communication and contact. The infrastructural project of telegraphic modernization did not only accelerate or expand communication on a global scale, it radically altered its conditions of possibility. With telegraphy came new opportunities, and new expectations, for sustaining one's presence in an autonomous, ethereal world of electrical currents and flows. This was a universe into which human bodies — covered in flesh, impaired by weak sensory organs, prone to fatigue, and slow to move — could never really enter. To the extent that electrical media were capable of duplicating and distributing human presences in this ethereal world of information exchange, the very terms of human communication had been forever changed. To interact with others now meant to read the traces of their virtual presence (Peters 1999, 142).

At the heart of this nexus of "virtual presence" stood the enigma of electricity itself. Like all things that flow, seemingly autonomously and autotelically — water, money, or even the stream of poetically-inspired thought — electricity provided both the metaphorical and practical groundwork for the key scientific orthodoxies and technocratic instrumentalities, and much popular thinking, that shaped the industrializing modernity of the Atlantic world in this period (Morus 1993; Morus 1996; Rowbottom and Susskind 1984; Schaffer 1993; Schiffer 2003; Whittaker 1910). It was through the medium of electricity that the nineteenth century produced a supraterritorial form of global connection. As a master trope, electricity facilitated the articulation of new modes of industrial and political power with new scenes of scientific inquiry, and new regimes of cultural production. The power of electricity thus offered a particularly vivid language for charting the imagined world of disembodied presence that had been brought into being by the technology of telegraphic communication. On its terms, new homologies could be forged between the representation of social life, and even of the human body itself, and the geography of industrial modernity, whereby, for instance, the electrical flow of a telegraph network could be likened to the arterial architecture of the human nervous system, or for that matter, the nervous twitches and flows of city traffic (Asendorf 1993, 153-177; cf. Otis 2001; Otis 2002). The model of the electrical flow thus served to both metaphorically represent and materially enable human intelligence to be extended and duplicated in new ways, such as by passing through the networked circuitry of a telegraph system.

It is of course too simple to suggest that the representational power of electricity was a direct product of the invention of the telegraph, since the cultural and scientific contexts in which electrical flow was formed as an object of knowledge has a long history. In the European context, the belief that some sort of ether pervades the universe had been prevalent at least since the time of Aristotle. Medieval Scholastic philosophers, grappling with the problem of *actio in distans* — that is, of

influencing bodies without actually touching them — had long relied on ethereal models of sympathetic vibration to explain the workings of nature (Whittaker 1910; cf. Fara 2002, 116-122; Peters 1999, 78). By the eighteenth century, this model was applied to the study of a wide variety of phenomena, including gravitational attraction, the body's nervous functions, acoustical and optical effects, and most importantly, electricity. Eighteenth century natural philosophers were widely convinced that electricity, weather, and life were intimately connected, as seemingly confirmed by Benjamin Franklin's experiments with lightning,[28] or later, by the work of the Italian anatomist, Luigi Galvani, famous for his elaborate theory of animal electricity.[29] With the invention of the telegraph, these long-standing conjunctures of scientific knowledge and cosmological speculation were simultaneously confirmed and reworked. Telegraphic applications of electrical energy now enabled diverse commentators to consider anew how the idea of electrical flow related to the mysteries of human intercourse and the natural order, and above all, the possibility of communication with "a world beyond" the spatially and temporally localized situations of everyday life experience.

These, then, are the terms on which telegraphy encompassed important elective affinities with religious movements and with the work of religious imagination in the nineteenth century, especially with regard to circulating ideas about progress, transcendence, social and ecological harmony, health and vitality, and death and the afterlife. If the actual experience of sending and receiving telegraphic communications was somewhat more arduous (and for most people in the nineteenth century, prohibitively expensive), the rhetoric of telegraphic entrepreneurs and supporters characterized the technology in terms of an instantaneous disembodiment of human consciousness, and the transmutation of information from its physical repositories of voice and ear, paper and ink, into the nebulous world of electricity. Telegraphic communication was frequently described in the nineteenth century in terms of miracles and sacramental power. This language resonated with a technological utopianism that enjoyed considerable appeal at the time, a popular faith in the progressive powers of technology — and in particular, of electricity — to deliver long-awaited promises of freedom, ecological harmony, and democratic community, all of which James Carey (paraphrasing Leo Marx) has aptly described as "the rhetoric of the electrical sublime" (1989, 123). For others, telegraphy was not so much the token of a new utopia as the sign of a pervasive dehumanization of social relations, against which images of a prelapsarian pastoral life were presented as a final refuge from the world of industrial machines.[30] And more often than not, at the level of popular culture, such debates concerning the moral implications of telegraphy were absorbed into a largely animistic understanding of the universe, where the lines dividing science, spectacle, and magic were often exceedingly difficult to draw. It therefore behoves us to attend carefully to the existence of a range of responses to, and accounts of, the sacramental powers inhering in such remarkable, world-transforming instruments as the telegraph. A striking case in point is the Spiritualist involvement with this technology.

The Spiritual Telegraph

Spiritualist engagements with telegraphy have already been noted by several scholars. Werner Sollors, for instance, has drawn attention to the striking historical and geographic coincidences between the birth of American Spiritualism and the advent of the telegraph, when "the most intensive years of telegraph expansion coincided with the years of the rise and rapid proliferation of its spiritual counterpart" (1983, 992).[31] The telegraph proved itself, to paraphrase Claude Lévi-Strauss, a productive "thing to think with," not only for the technological literati, whose experience with electrical instruments afforded them symbolic power as "experts,"[32] but also for those engaged in the business of occultism. As shown by the Fox sisters, communication with the dead could be achieved by opening and manipulating a channel, not unlike a telegraph circuit. Apparently, the Fox family home served as an ideal site because the dwelling "was charged with the aura requisite to make it a battery for the working of the [spiritual] telegraph" (Sollors 1983, 994; cf. Noakes 1999, 422; Sconce 2000, 36). Spiritualists argued that the very idea of electromagnetic telegraphy was originally an inspiration from

the spirit world, a gift presented to humankind in order to facilitate communication among the living and the dead. And, just like the terrestrial telegraph, the technology of the Spiritual Telegraph was the object of evolving ideas about application and design. In 1854, the American Universalist minister, John Murray Spear (1804-1887)[33] was a recipient of detailed plans, provided by the spirit of Benjamin Franklin, for the construction of a "soul-blending telegraph": an intercontinental telepathic transmitter, to be powered by a corps of sensitized mediums installed in male/female pairs in high towers, that would compete with the existing telegraph service, and would succeed where much-vaunted attempts to lay transatlantic cable had yet to prove their worth.[34]

In the context of an expanding reading public conversant in scientific discovery and the marvels of modern engineering, Spiritualists seized upon the example of telegraphy in order to elaborate a grand theory of supernatural presence, grounded in the power of electromagnetism. Andrew Jackson Davis (1826-1910), a leading American Spiritualist, proposed that "the conditions and principles upon which spirits answer to the inquiries of man … are no more complicated or wonderful than the principles upon which the magnetic telegraph is daily operating along our great commercial avenues" (quoted in Sollors 1983, 995). In France, Allan Kardec similarly described spirit mediumship in telegraphic terms. The work of the medium, Kardec reported in his 1861 manual, *The Book on Mediums*,

> is that of an electrical machine, which transmits telegraphic despatches from point of the earth to another far distant. So, when we wish to dictate a communication, we act on the medium as the telegraph operator on his instruments; that is, as the tac-tac of the telegraph writes thousands of miles away, on a slip of paper, the reproduced letters of the despatch, the visible from the invisible world, the immaterial from the incarnated world, communicate what we [spirits] wish to teach you [living people] by means of the medianimic instrument. (1861/1970, 292-3)

The invisibility and intangibility of electric current, and its capacity to collapse time and space onto a single, continuous plane of reference provided the perfect analogy for the existence of the human soul beyond the body. And if telegraphic technologies could harness electromagnetic forces in order to communicate intentional messages, why should it not be possible to develop comparable techniques in order to communicate with the dead? From this perspective, Spiritualists proposed merely to enlarge the range of possible interlocutors within the new social environment created by the telegraph: accounting for a semiotic space in which, strictly speaking, communication with the distant and communication with phantasmic traces of the dead are phenomenologically indistinguishable (cf. Peters 1999, 149). In other words, what Spiritualists presented was a technically plausible explanation for occult knowledge, aligned with the authority of nineteenth century science and engineering, and the tantalizing promises that lay beyond unexplored avenues for the mingling of spiritual forces and electrical fluids. As Kardec reasoned,

> A hundred years ago, a person who should have proposed to transmit a despatch five hundred leagues and receive an answer in a few minutes, would have been called a fool: had he done it, it would have been thought that he had the devil under his orders; for at that time the devil alone was capable of traveling so rapidly. Why, then, should not an unknown fluid have the property, under given circumstances, to counterbalance the effect of weight, as hydrogen counterbalances the weight of the balloon? (Kardec 1861/1970, 22)

The analogy of spirit mediumship and telegraphy worked because it referenced a deeper cosmological claim about electricity as one dimension of a more "universal fluid," permeating all forms of animate and inanimate being, and enabling their intercourse with one another. For some, such as John Dods, a New England Universalist Church minister, amateur scientist and a prominent trance speaker of the 1850s,[35] electricity was part of a natural theology in which electromagnetic energy was interchangeable with the grace of God, and the holy sacrament (or for that matter, the experience of

falling into a trance state) was a mechanism for aligning oneself with God's transcendent energy. "All motion and power originate in the mind," Dods argued, "and just as the human spirit, through an electromagnetic medium, comes into contact with matter, so the infinite Spirit does the same, and through this medium he governs the universe" (quoted in Buescher 2004, 8). Not unlike the Christian receiving divine communion, or a cable receiving an electric charge, or a sensation passing through the nervous system of the body, spirit mediumship was a means of receiving and further transmitting fluid energies that emanated from somewhere beyond. In each case, reception requires the capacity for proper attunement of the host. For the spirit medium, this meant being endowed with the correct "electro-medianimic machinery," as Kardec called it. In order to receive a spirit, Kardec explains,

> there must exist between the spirit and the medium influenced a certain affinity, a certain analogy, in a word, a certain resemblance, which permits the … fluid of the incarnated to be mingled, united, combined with that of the spirit who desires to produce the effect. This fusion should be such that the resulting force becomes, so to say, *one*; as the electric current acting on the coal produces one flame, one single brightness. (1861/1970, 116-117)

Claims about the receptivity of spirit communication were thus inextricably tied to claims about the body of the spirit medium herself, constituted as a complex of nervous pathways and "cerebral batteries" enabling the immaterial and the material to communicate properly.[36] More than simply a metaphor, the Spiritual Telegraph was a *model* for the working of the body, and also a model for the practice of communication itself, worked out through the electrical principles of current and charge, capacity and resistance, circuit and field. As a model, the Spiritual Telegraph was a context for both representing and animating the body in ways appropriate to the conditions of life routinized through the spread of electrical technologies.

I stress the notion of the Spiritual Telegraph as a model for action if for no other reason than to dispel any lingering assumptions that Spiritualism was just another "religious" response to the electrical industrialization of the Atlantic world of the nineteenth century (see, for example, Oppenheim 1985). The history of Spiritualism must not be reduced to an exotic episode of initial contact with the disorienting effects of modern technologies: an experience, one might further presume, which was eventually displaced by more sober, disenchanted apprehensions of their "true" functions, as revealed in routine practices of labour, business, or statecraft. This is a common interpretation of Spiritualism's popular appeal, and of its eventual demise (at least with regard to the industrialized North Atlantic world). From that perspective, Spiritualism resembled the "primitive" possession cult, whose performances could be read as symptoms of trauma, or an infantile retreat into a world of fantasy. A complementary interpretation of Spiritualism as nothing more than a palliative practice might emerge from the observation that Spiritualist performances were most typically staged in the darkened parlour of the bourgeois home. The parlour, after all, provided a richly auratic environment that contrasted dramatically with the harsh lights and fast movements of the modern city. Surrounded therein by the tactile signs of domesticity and intimacy — of hands linked together and hushed voices — seance clients seemed well insulated from the disenchanting or enervating effects of industrial labour, and the cold calculus of capitalist exchange. In this reading, Spiritualism was so popular because it offered a return to the maternal womb, enacting the scene of primary narcissism.

However, this line of interpretation should not distract us from noting that the feminine-coded interiority of the bourgeois parlour was hardly a static place. On the contrary, its boundaries were continually being renegotiated, as Spiritualist activities extended out from local sites and into national and international arenas of public visibility.[37] The seance chamber was certainly proclaimed by many to be hermetically sealed from the world of the mundane, and open only to the universe of spirit. But in their actual activities, seance practitioners opened themselves to penetrative powers of the capitalist market, the machinery of advertising, and the logics of spectacle and rationalized labour that by the late

nineteenth century were converging to create the new cultural spaces of transatlantic modernity. And were there any agents more capable of effecting such penetrations than emergent technologies of electrically-mediated communication? An affirmative answer to this question, I think, sheds considerable light on Spiritualism's deep entanglement with the embodied sensations and imaginative powers elicited by new technologies such as the telegraph. Enveloped with promises of bringing together the visible and the invisible, the public and the private, and the global and the local, the telegraph provided more than a convenient analogy for Spiritualist seance practice. It pointed toward a new type of human subject. This agent was now located in a cosmic order that mirrored the developing logic of communication technologies in the nineteenth century, and their performative goals to erase distance, freeze time, or to circumvent what seemed otherwise to be an inevitable route toward inertia and decay of bodies and things.

In this regard, it is not surprising that Spiritualists incorporated different apparatuses for unravelling the mystery of spirit communication: a vast array of mechanical devices, including metal cables, speaking trumpets, clocks, scales, pressure gauges, planchettes, ouija boards, and other instruments of "automatic writing." Such objects were regarded as feasible devices for registering and distributing invisible powers within the natural order of things, such as the presence of the souls of the dead. From a Spiritualist point of view, the use of many such instruments revealed something about the nature of the cosmos in general: the susceptibility of all things, spirits included, to the laws of electromagnetism. At the same time, through the introduction of electrical technologies into seance practice, Spiritualists were able to demonstrate to their competitors and critics their deep commitment to the language of investigation, exhibition, exposure, and evidence. This is vividly illustrated in the case of Cromwell Fleetwood Varley (1828-1883), the renowned consulting electrician of the Atlantic Telegraph Company, and one of the great engineers of transatlantic telegraphy in the 1860s, and also a committed Spiritualist. Varley used his engineering expertise with submarine telegraphy in order to contribute to the establishment of a credible science of Spiritualism, and also to develop new seance protocols that would incorporate the skills and resources of the telegraph testing-room. These included the application of instruments such as a magnetized helix, resistance coils, and a mirror-galvanometer, all of which Varley had originally designed in order to test signal retardation on possible Atlantic cable designs, and to teach novice clerks the art of efficient deep-sea cable signalling. But in the seance chamber, these same devices were utilized in order to determine the "circuit effects" of the medium's body during moments of spirit communication (see Noakes 1999, 423, 432, 437, 442-7; cf. Noakes 2002). On such terms, the seance chamber was figured as a sort of laboratory: a stage for investigating the spirit world, for obtaining its secrets, and also for surveilling the body of the spirit medium through what could be presented as scientifically accredited methods of precise manipulation and controlled observation (cf. Lamont 2004).

In sum, Spiritualism was a distinct type of religious movement in the nineteenth century, not only on account of its organizational framework and its transnational spread, but also because it offered a means of receiving supernatural gifts through the technologically-enhanced senses. As Lawrence Moore puts it, "in the interest of [serving] a population excited by scientific discovery, spiritualists proposed a religious faith which depended upon seeing and touching" (1972, 484). More precisely stated, Spiritualist practice involved a delicate negotiation between the agency invested in new technologies of inscription and transmission, and the agency of the human sensorium. And to that extent, spirit communication could be understood as an empirically confirmable condition of the body, the performative gestures of which enacted forms of automatism and mechanization that mimicked (and thereby transvalued) the work of telegraphs and other modern machines.

Lisa Gitelman explains this mimetic relationship between spirit mediumship and telegraphic practice in her careful analysis of "automatic writing" within nineteenth century practices and technologies of inscription. According to one definition, automatic writing referred to the Spiritualist

practice of writing "mediumistically": that is, the enactment of the authorial agency of the dead through the receptacle of a living body, and the production during trance states of elaborate texts, memoirs, lists, maps, or even entire works of literature or music (Gitelman 1999, 186-9).[38] But at the same time, in the context of late nineteenth century bureaucracy and its culture of invention, the term automatic writing referred to the work performed by autonomous technologies of inscription and transcription, such as telegraph machines, stock tickers, and the related business machinery of phonographs, mimeographs, telephones, and typewriters. As Gitelman points out (1999, 191), the impetus for the technical development of these machines was rooted in their capacities for speedier transmission of information (duplex, and later quadruplex telegraph receivers, for instance, could work ten, twenty, or even fifty times faster than human telegraph operators) and thereby the lowering of overhead costs, precipitating a deskilling and a marked feminization of office labour. Such inventions also bore the traces of concern about authority and authorship, witnessing, and evidence, and the reliability of existing modes of transcription, interpretation, and reportage embodied in the figures of the telegraph operator, the court stenographer, or the office clerk, which until the late nineteenth century, not coincidentally, were largely the preserve of skilled male workers.

What was hailed as the precision and selfless operation of modern machinery thus allowed for a renewed examination of how much intelligence was required for accurate inscription, and how reliable were human eyes, ears, and fingers for the effective work of modern offices. With the introduction of so-called automatic writing machines, the concerted attention that skilled operators needed for controlling instruments such as the telegraph was steadily displaced onto the concerted attention that employers and technical experts could now devote to the smooth operating of the communicative apparatuses themselves, and the firm management of an increasingly female office workforce (cf. Lipartito 1994). In this context, automaticity referred to the kind of work performed by partially conscious and distracted subjects, whose bodies were increasingly being encased in the prosthetic shell of modern office technologies (cf. Kittler 1999, 183-198). Here once again, the trope of feminine passivity dovetailed neatly with concerns about the undistorted mediation of information, and the pliability of (predominantly) female bodies to the demands of "'mechanical objectivity,' a presumed freedom from human subjectivity, and consequently from error" (Gitelman 1999, 189).

Spiritualism and the performance of modern bureaucratic office work thus strikingly shared the same anxieties about witnessing and evidence, the same ambiguities about authoritative agency, the same economy of gender difference. Like a spirit medium and her seance clients locked in the darkness of the seance chamber, modern business workers were consumed by the power of invisible technologies of inscription and the presence of mysterious utterances increasingly divorced from the graphical accoutrements of authorship and the textures and particularities of handwriting (Gitelman 1999, 211-213). And much like modern office labour, Spiritualist performances exhibited principles of automatization and dematerialization that had been given new impetus by a range of instruments and institutional arrangements, beginning with space of the telegraph office. The act of being possessed by a spirit was thus phenomenologically comparable to the autotelic labour of electrical machines; in both cases, what was brought into existence was a system for the circulation of discourse freed from the "normal" conditions of individual human subjectivity, where one is supposed to enjoy mastery over one's conscious intentions and one's own body. Here, then, we find a curious inversion of the liberal ideal of individual autonomy, where Spiritualist performances are designed precisely to relinquish control of the body, and to accumulate benefits from such experiences.

To those extents, we might also say that Spiritualism played a crucial role in the larger historical project of transatlantic modernity to reorganize the terms on which human agency is conceived, as well as the terms on which the human body is animated. On the one hand, the new media of virtual presence have promoted the encasement of our bodies in a shell of technological prostheses, while on the other hand they have placed a new premium on mutual presence "in person," "in the flesh," as the last refuge of authenticity in a world of doppelgängers, electronic avatars, and other cyborg manifestations.

Indeed, the Spiritualist preoccupation with disembodied communion references deeper philosophical questions which are familiar to all participants in modern communicative practice: can thought exist without the "hardware" of the living terrestrial organism — that bundle of techniques and devices — known as the human body? What is the status of intentionality when nothing is left except the graphic trace of one's words, the recorded sound of one's voice, or the photographed image of one's face? If new communication technologies possess the power to conquer time and space, what is left to say about the residual materialities of everyday life, and their subordination to the exigencies of inertia and decay?

Answers to such questions are of course highly variable, depending, among other things, on the considerable differences among the local spaces in which technologies are introduced, confronted, absorbed, resisted, or transformed by local users, according to the local resources available, both material and symbolic. In this respect, we must continue to bear in mind that the articulation of the Spiritual Telegraph might well have meant one thing in the context of the United States, another in the United Kingdom, quite another in France, and yet again in Brazil, to name some of the most significant circum-Atlantic sites.[39] The study of the Spiritual Telegraph therefore calls for a new theoretical formulation of the conditions of production and circulation of techno-religious imaginaries: the technology of religious imagination and the (religious) imagination of technologies. We require a language that is sufficiently flexible to attend to globalizing flows, while at the same time accommodating local differences. It is my hope that this paper has succeeded, if only provisionally, to indicate some possible directions for that future project.

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NOTES

1. For a useful survey of debates over such matters, see (Smith and Marx 2001).

2. It is necessary here to insert a caveat that the terms "secular" and "religious" are the subject of considerable scholarly debate in recent years, and their referents are hardly self evident. See, for example, (Asad 2003).

3. As Bruno Latour argues (1993,13-48), the modern order of things rests upon a series of institutional, practical, and cognitive purifications, which have rendered religion, science, and the state as ontologically distinct realms, each subject to its own autonomous laws and methodologically differentiated performative principles. According to this pax moderna, "religion" is comprehensible, and legitimate, only if construed in terms of metaphysics (i.e., as something rigorously separated from the "objective" procedures of techno-scientific practice) or spirituality (i.e., as the "intimacy of the heart," rigorously separated from the performative demands of state citizenship). Similar claims about the institutional, cultural, and epistemological differentiation of spheres of conduct in modern life are widely distributed in social scientific

discourse, not least among (neo-) Weberians. See, for example, (Beyer 1994) and (Robertson 1992) for comparable descriptions of the structural differentiation of "religion" under modern conditions of globalization.

4. For a particularly insightful discussion of these issues, see (Latour 2002).

5. My approach is modelled loosely on Tzvetan Todorov's (1984) proposal that a well-chosen historical narrative can be used to address larger philosophical and social questions. The underlying assumptions I must make about the exemplarity of historical narratives, and their relation to the standards of verisimilitude and protocols of professional historiographical practice cannot be addressed in this limited context.

6. See, for example, (Asendorf 1993), (Blondheim 1994a; 1994b), (Crary 1990), (Gitelman 1999), (Gitelman and Pingree 2003), (Kittler 1999), (Lipartito 1994), (Marx 1964), (Marvin 1988), (Morus 1993; 1996), (Peters 1999), (Sconce 2000), (Tagg 1993).

7. A dramatic enactment of this "global" sensibility was the convening of the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 (see Seager 1995).

8. Ann Braude (1989, 25-6) has commented on the difficulty of measuring adherence to Spiritualism, given the movement's markedly acephalous nature: no formally recognized leadership, and no clear protocols for defining one's status within the cause. Furthermore, the porous boundaries dividing Spiritualism from other religious categories — especially with regard to the difference between Spiritualists and "ordinary" Christians, or, for that matter, between Spiritualists and adherents to a variety of indigenous religions practised in West Africa, Brazil, the Caribbean, and elsewhere — make it difficult to produce meaningful statistics. Nevertheless, there is wide consensus that Spiritualism enjoyed a precipitous growth over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century. In the United States alone, John Goodwin (1972, 188) estimates that as early as 1855, there were 1.5 million committed Spiritualists (out of a total population of twenty-five million). Others have suggested that by the end of 1850s, three million Americans were at least peripherally engaged with the movement, and that, by the 1870s, this number rose to over eleven million (see Moore 1972, 481; Sollors 1983, 991). In 1880, the US Federal Census listed over 600 persons who identified their profession as clairvoyant, spirit medium, trance lecturer, or magnetic healer, although this figure is considered to be an extremely conservative account of the actual number of Spiritualist mediums, which many have estimated to be in the thousands (see www.spirithistory.com/80fedcen.html). Paul Johnson, for his part, contends that by 1870 the total world population of committed Spiritualists had reached eleven million (1997, 299).

Spiritualism (or Spiritism) remains a significant religious movement even today. According to the 1997*Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year*, there were 10,292,500 adherents of "Spiritism" in the world. In the Brazilian census of 2000, over 2.2 million people identified themselves as Kardecists (roughly 1.3% of the total population), but this number does not account for a fringe following (not officially professed, but possibly quite avid) of up to 50 million (see:

www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html#Spiritism and /www.state.gov.g/drd/rls/irf/2004/35528.htm).

9. Many of the movement's leading figures were in fact well-educated men and women of high standing. In the context of the North Atlantic world, this included writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, James Fenimore Cooper, Annie Besant, William Butler Yeats, Victor Hugo, or much later, Arthur Conan Doyle; engineers and scientists, such as Alfred Russell Wallace, Thomas Edison, Oliver Lodge and William Crookes; political reformers, such as Robert Owen; and even Mrs. Lincoln was said to be a committed Spiritualist, holding seances in the White House. For discussion of Spiritualism in French bourgeois society, see (Edelman 1995), (Monroe 2003), (Sharp 1999). For a comparable account of the penetration of Spiritualism (in the specific form of Kardecism) into Brazilian middle-class and elite society, see (Aubrée and Laplatine 1990) and (Hess 1991).

10. On the development within Spiritualist circles of systems for rapping — from a binary code of "yes/no" questions to more complex alphabetic raps—see (Moore 1972, 482) and (Sollors 1983, 991, 994).

11. On Spiritualist influences on British, Canadian, American, French, and British colonial literary production see (Brown et al. 2004), (Matlock 2000), (McCormack 2003), (McMullin 2004), (Owen 2004), (Pick 2000), (Sword 1999), (Tatar 1978), (Thurschwell 2001), and (Viswanathan 2000). On links between Spiritualism and the birth of cinema, see (During 2002), (Gunning 1995). On Spiritualism's role in the rise of first-wave feminism, see (Braude 1989), (Dixon 2001), and (Owen 1989). On the relationship between Spiritualism and the development of experimental psychology, psychiatric medicine, psychoanalysis, and sexology, see (Crabtree 1993), (Fuller 1982), (Hacking 1988), (McGarry 2000), (Oppenheim 1985), (Oughourlian 1991), (Porter 2005), (Scott 1999), (Taves 1999), (Wadge 2000) and (Winter 1998). For discussion of Spiritualism within nineteenth century theoretical constructions of rationality and irrationality, and in particular accounts of human sociability within early sociology and anthropology, see (Nye 1975), (Pels 2003), (Stocking 1971), and (van Ginneken 1992). On the relationship between Spiritualism and Christian Science, see (Podmore 1909/1963). Lastly, for an annotated bibliography of Spiritualist primary sources in English, see (Braude 1990).

12. One of its key intellectual progenitors was the eighteenth century mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, whose speculations on the ministry of angels were revived in the nineteenth century, and creatively integrated into a new, syncretic theology concerning the unity of the divine with all living things, the co-existence of the world of spirit with the natural world as complementary expressions of "infinite intelligence," and the survival of one's personal identity after death (Brock 1988).

13. There are various ways to account for this, not least the fact that in Victorian culture, religious practice was arguably the arena of activity most open to feminine virtuosity. Spirit mediumship in particular offered women of virtually any social standing or educational background the opportunity to enjoy a high-profile career, lay claim to otherworldly insight, entertain friends, confound skeptics, console the bereaved, and earn considerable money, all the while conforming to Victorian ideals of feminine passivity. See (Basham 1992), (Braude 1989), (Owen 1989), and (Sword 1999).

14. These are the grounds upon which several scholars have argued that nineteenth century Spiritualism formed a major — if not *the* major — vehicle for the spread of feminist critiques of Victorian patriarchal culture. Indeed, arguments in favour of women's rights and suffrage had already been formulated by spirit mediums long before such ideas were voiced by more famous first-wave American feminists, such as Susan B. Anthony or Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Braude 1989, 56-141). A comparable analysis with respect to English feminism in the late nineteenth century is put forth in (Owen 1989). For discussion of the transnational links among North Atlantic feminists in the nineteenth century, see (Holton 1994), (McFadden 1999).

15. There now exists a vast literature on spirit possession and related phenomena in cross-cultural perspective, from ancient Greek Dionysian cults to Haitian voudon to Sufi mystics to Siberian shamans. For general treatments, see (Boddy 1994), (Lewis 2003).

   That said, the comparison between Spiritualism and "non-Western" possession cults must not rest on abstract generalities or the construction of "ideal types," but rather on actual cases of productive interchange and cross-fertilization between the metropolitan world of the Victorian occult and a range of performative traditions originating in the pre-industrialized world, as in the case of Kardecismo/Umbanda/Santería, discussed below. See (Viswanathan 2000) for an analogous study of Theosophy and occult knowledge among colonial emigrés in late nineteenth century British India, and their relation to the indigenous knowledge and practices of Indian colonial subjects.

16. The term "circum-Atlantic" is borrowed from (Roach 1996).

17. See, inter alia, (Gilroy 1993), (Holton 1994), (McFadden 1999), (Roach 1996), and (Rodgers 1998).

18. See, for example, (Cañizares-Esguerra 2001) and (Gabaccia 2004). A comparable argument is staged by (Chakrabarty 2000).

19. These references are culled from the first ten years of *La Revue Spirite* (1858-1868), under its founding editor Allan Kardec. A complete archive (in French) of the first decades of the journal can be found at www.espirito.org.br/portal/download/pdf/fr/index.htmland www.espirito.com.br/.

20. On the growth of Spiritism in France, see (Edelman 1995), (Kselman 1993), (Monroe 2003), (Sharp 1999). On the Spiritist movement in nineteenth century Spain, see (Abend 2004). On the transplantation of Kardec's ideas to Brazil, see (Aubrée and Laplatine 1990), (Bastide 1960), (Damazio 1994), (Giumbelli 1997), (Hess 1991), and (Vasconcelos 2003). On the development of Kardecismo in hispanophone Caribbean — in particular, Cuba and Puerto Rico — see (Brandon 1993), (Bermudez 1967), and (Palmié 2002).

21. See, for example, (Apter 1991), (Austen 1993), (Brandon 1993), (Palmié 2002), and (Peel 2000).

22. A few words of caution are in order here. First, I do not mean to suggest that the "birth" of telegraphy can be traced back to a single event. Rather, its advent was shaped by the convergence of multiple processes, implicating an array of inventors, investors, and intermediary agents. On the early history of the introduction of electrical telegraphy, and especially the heated competition between Cooke and Wheatstone (in England) and Samuel Morse during the 1830s and 1840s, see (Beauchamp 2001, 20-101), (Morus 1998, 194-230), and (Standage 1998, 22-56).

   Second, it is hazardous to refer to "the" telegraph as a singular technology. Morse's electromagnetic telegraph apparatus was only one of a diverse group of nineteenth century devices associated with the practice of "distance-writing" (telegraphy). Telegraphy thus involved the use of different media (e.g., electrical or optical signals, mediated through cable or line-of-sight systems), different ways of encoding and deciphering messages (in respect of which, one must note, Morse code was not immediately accepted as a universal standard), and different possibilities of human interface (e.g., machines that required attention from human operators as opposed to those which could relay signals automatically).

   Finally, one must also guard against the temptation to rely upon heroic narratives of technological invention, which typically repress the considerable cultural, financial, and technical contingencies involved in establishing a viable market for new technologies. For a more nuanced account of the commodification of information, the establishment of new

systems of circulation through telegraphy, and the integration of this technology into the emerging industrial infrastructure of railways, shipping lines, postal services, and so on, see (Morus 1996).

23. See, inter alia, (Blondheim 1994a), (Carey 1989), (Downey 2002), (Gordon 2002), (Headrick 1988; 1991), (Lubrano 1997), and (Mattelart 1996).

24. For instance, telegraphy enabled the tightening of military chains of command. In the Crimean War in the 1850s, French and British governments were able for the first time to communicate directly with their generals on a distant battlefield (Standage 1998, 154-8). In a similar vein, European states — especially the British — quickly recognized how the telegraph, alongside innovations in steam shipping and railways, facilitated the shift to a new mode of imperial rule, whereby metropolitan authorities could dictate courses of events in the colonies directly and immediately, rather than simply responding to news of events that had been communicated by colonial bureaucrats weeks or even months after the fact (see, for example, Headrick 1988; 1991).

25. This was the case in Brazil, where the introduction of the technology was crucial for the process of colonizing vast peripheral spaces, such as the regions of Minas Gerais, Mato Grosso, or the Amazon basin, and bringing these hinterlands into alignment with an emerging Brazilian nationalism and participation in cosmopolitan community. See (Birchal 2001) and (Diacon 2004).

26. A useful summary of the history of these international cabling initiatives, including a timeline of formation of companies and expeditions for laying submarine cable, can be found at the web-based archive: http://atlantic-cable.com.

27. On the definition of globalization as a form of supraterritorialism, see (Scholte 2000). On the role played by telegraphy in the standardization of time zones (in conjunction with expanding railway networks, and the technical demands they elicited for predictable temporal calculations), see, inter alia, (Carey 1989, 227-9).

28. On the history of Franklin's experiments and their intellectual and social impact, see (Schiffer 2003) and (Tucker 2003). On the theme of lightning in Romantic literature, see (Tatar 1978, 82-120).

29. Working within the Newtonian model of ethereal vibration, Galvani had identified the nervous medium with electricity, claiming that all animals possess a special electric fluid that is generated in the brain and which passes through the nerves into muscles that function like organic batteries. Since living bodies responded so strongly to electricity, it did not seem unreasonable to suggest that they might also be able to generate it (Pera 1992, 69-95).

The idea of animal electricity was popularized in the early nineteenth century, not least in the form of experiments on dead human bodies: most famously, the public demonstration performed upon George Forster, a convicted murderer who was hanged at Newgate, London in January 1803, and then electrified by Giovanni Aldini, Galvani's nephew and most ardent propagandist (Fara 2002, 165-170; Morus 1998, 127-130). Aldini presupposed a theory of electric vitality that originated in Galvani's work, but which also seemed to be corroborated by increasingly systematic attempts to explore the reactions of electricity on the infirm: efforts which by the end of the eighteenth century had already been incorporated into the routine practices of major hospitals of Britain and France (Fara 2002, 82-98; Pera 1992, 18-25; Rowbottom and Susskind 1984, 15-70; cf. Morus 1998, 231-255). Such macabre spectacles were equally well suited to an expanding, scientific "culture of display" that lay beneath the nineteenth century's fascination with galvanism, and with the power of electricity to create life itself (Morus 1993; Morus 1996, 342-9; Schaffer 1993). It was in this vein that galvanic theories of vitality also penetrated the Romantic and Gothic literary genres of the nineteenth century, most obviously in the case of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (Fara 2002, 168-9; Tatar 1978, 60-63).

30. For accounts of technological utopianism and dystopianism in nineteenth century America, see (Marx 1964), (Noble 1997) and (Nye 1990). An incisive account of the pessimism surrounding the introduction of telegraphy in particular can be found in (Blondheim 1994b).

31. See also (Braude 1989, 4-5), (Connor 1999; 2000), (Moore 1972, 486ff), (Peters 1999, 94-5), and (Sconce 2000, 12-14, 21-8, 36-7, 56-8). A contemporary chronicler and active figure within Spiritualism, Emma Hardinge, also provides considerable evidence that the metaphor of the telegraph enjoyed widespread currency within American Spiritualist circles (Hardinge 1870).

32. The best account of the consolidation of an increasingly professionalized class of electrical experts over the course of the nineteenth century is found in (Marvin 1988, 9-62).

33. Spear was a prominent advocate for various reform movements, including abolition, temperance, and women's rights, as well as a committed Spiritualist. In 1852, in states of trance, Spear was contacted by a number of spirits, including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, and other distinguished departed ones, who together formed an "Association of Beneficents," and who delivered to Spear a series of plans for the remaking of society through philanthropic work and political reform (including calls to take up arms in order to free slaves and to replace the present government with a "true democracy"), as well as furnishing detailed plans for new machines and new architecture that would facilitate the coming

of this new age. Spear's exploits are detailed in (Buescher 2004, 170-184). See also www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/johnmurrayspear.html.

34. "The Soul-Blending Telegraph". The New York Tribune, 18 August 1854.

35. In 1836, Dods viewed the New England exhibition tour of Charles Poyen St. Sauveur, a French Mesmerist and experimenter, and on this basis acquired a sense of the connections between electricity, magnetism, and their therapeutic properties (see Buescher 2004, 6).

36. See (Morus 1996, 375), (Braude 1989, 23-4), (Sconce 2000, 55-50), (Sollers 1983, 996). On the intangibility of the "wires" enabling spirit communication, see (Noakes 1999, 446, 450-9). The homology between the human nervous system and electrical cables was not unique to Spiritualists, for that matter; they were pervasively conjoined in the nineteenth century imaginary, from such disparate discourses as medicine and Romantic poetry (Asendorf 1993, 153-177; cf. Otis 2001; Otis 2002).

37. The expansion of the Spiritualist enterprise was thus redolent of a broader shift in modes of cultural production during the latter half of the nineteenth century, whereby locally-specific material cultures and folk arts were transformed into mass-circulation commodities destined for public display (such as on the Vaudevillean stage or in the pages of the national press).

38. We might add that such occurrences attained sufficient regularity in the nineteenth century to warrant the need for extended discussion about how to catalogue texts emanating from the spirit world, giving rise to the curious Victorian science of necrobibliography (Sword 1999). At the same time, practices of spirit writing also spawned a range of stenographic devices and instruments, most notably the ouija board and the planchette (see, for example, Thurschwell 2001, 86-114).

39. Brazil merits inclusion in this list, not only because (as we have already seen) it provided fertile soil for the development of Kardecism, but also because it was a very early recipient of electrically-mediated technologies in the nineteenth century. Cities such as Rio de Janeiro in fact experienced rapid technological modernization, in close step with their northern counterparts (see Birchal 2001; Diacon 2004; Maciel 2001; Sevcenko 1998; Süssekind 1997).

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Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition

The Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition was created in January 1998 following the designation of globalization and the human condition as a strategic area of research by the Senate of McMaster University. Subsequently, it was approved as an official research center by the University Planning Committee. The Institute brings together a group of approximately 30 scholars from both the social sciences and humanities. Its mandate includes the following responsibilities:

- a facilitator of research and interdisciplinary discussion with the view to building an intellectual community focused on globalization issues.
- a centre for dialogue between the university and the community on globalization issues
- a promoter and administrator of new graduate programming

In January 2002, the Institute also became the host for a Major Collaborative Research Initiatives Project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada where a group of over 40 researchers from across Canada and abroad are examining the relationships between globalization and autonomy.

The WORKING PAPER SERIES...
circulates papers by members of the Institute as well as other faculty members and invited graduate students at McMaster University working on the theme of globalization. Scholars invited by the Institute to present lectures at McMaster will also be invited to contribute to the series.

Objectives:

- To foster dialogue and awareness of research among scholars at McMaster and elsewhere whose work focuses upon globalization, its impact on economic, social, political and cultural relations, and the response of individuals, groups and societies to these impacts. Given the complexity of the globalization phenomenon and the diverse reactions to it, it is helpful to focus upon these issues from a variety of disciplinary perspectives.
- To assist scholars at McMaster and elsewhere to clarify and refine their research on globalization in preparation for eventual publication.

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Techno-Religious Imaginaries: On the Spiritual Telegraph and the Circum-Atlantic World of the 19th Century

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