

September 2015

Spreading the Spirit Word: Print Media, Storytelling, and Popular Culture in Nineteenth- Century Spiritualism

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Recommended Citation

Natale, Simone (2015) "Spreading the Spirit Word: Print Media, Storytelling, and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism," *communication +1*: Vol. 4, Article 12.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cpo/vol4/iss1/12>

DOI: 10.7275/R5GF0RF9

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Abstract

Spiritualists in the nineteenth century gave much emphasis to the collection of evidences of scientific meaning. During séances, they used instruments similar to those employed in scientific practice to substantiate their claims. However, these were not the only source of legitimization offered in support of the spiritualist claims. In fact, writers who aimed to provide beliefs in spiritualism with a reliable support relied very often on the testimonies of eyewitness that were reported in a narrative fashion. This article interrogates the role of such anecdotal testimonies in nineteenth-century spiritualism. It argues that they played a twofold role: on one side, they offered a form of evidentiary proof that was complementary to the collection of mechanical-based evidences; on the other side, they circulated in spiritualist publications, creating opportunities to reach a wide public of readers that was made available by the emergence of a mass market for print media. Able to convince, but also to entertain the reader, anecdotal testimonies were perfectly suited for publications in spiritualist books and periodicals. The proliferation of anecdotal testimonies in spiritualist texts, in this regard, hints at the relevance of storytelling in the diffusion of beliefs about religious matters as well as scientific issues within the public sphere. By reporting and disseminating narrative testimonies, print media acted as a channel through which spiritualism's religious and scientific endeavors entered the field of a burgeoning popular culture.

Keywords

Media history, Spiritualism, Print media, Media and religion, Popular Culture, Evidence, Communication

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Introduction

In 1879, American psychologist George M. Beard published an essay titled “The Psychology of Spiritism.” The essay aimed to approach issues of spiritualist interest, such as trance and automatism, from the perspective of neurology and the psychological science. Moving from a sharply rationalistic standpoint, Beard intended to expose the failure of spiritualists in comprehending the scientific facts laying behind alleged spirit phenomena. In order to do so, he criticized how evidences supporting the claims of spiritualism were gathered. In spiritualism, Beard argued, the principle of evidence was drawn from the testimony of human beings. Spiritualists thus posited that the senses are worthy of trust, and that the quality of an observer and reporter depends on honesty rather than expertness. Such ideas were to be firmly refused by the modern scientist:

The rejection of non-expert human testimony is, and has ever been, the first step in the development of a science; it is only by rejecting or ignoring all testimony save that of experts that any science is possible. Human testimony, indeed, handicaps mankind: it is a burden under which humanity, in its slow advance, has ever struggled and yet struggles. Not out of the mouths of two or three witnesses nor of two or three millions, unless they be experts, can any great fact in science be established.

Beard’s critique touched a quite delicate issue for believers in spiritualism. In fact, spiritualists gave much emphasis to the collection of evidences of scientific meaning.¹ During séances, instruments and protocols similar to those employed in scientific practice were sometimes used by spiritualists in order to substantiate their claims.² Evidences produced by such means were, however,

¹ Authors such as R. Laurence Moore, Peter Lamont, and Sofie Lachapelle agree that spiritualism was a “scientific religion” where the issue of faith came together with the collection of evidences aimed at providing a credible confirmation of the spiritualist claims. Sofie Lachapelle, *Investigating the Supernatural: From Spiritism and Occultism to Psychical Research and Metapsychics in France, 1853-1931* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Peter Lamont, “Spiritualism and a Mid-Victorian Crisis of Evidence,” *The Historical Journal* 47, no. 4 (2004): 897-920; R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). See also Christian Kassung, “Selbstschreiber und elektrische Gespenster. Übertragungen zwischen Physik und Okkultismus,” in *Von der Dämonologie zum Unbewußten. Die Transformation der Anthropologie um 1800*, edited by Erhard Schüttpelz and Maren Sziade (Amsterdam: De Gruyter, 2015).

² For a relevant instance, see Robert Hare, *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations, Demonstrating the Existence of Spirits and Their Communion with*

neither the only nor the main source of legitimization offered in support of the spiritualist claims. In fact, writers who aimed to provide the claims of spiritualism with a reliable support drew very often on anecdotes and human testimonies.³ As Stefan Andriopoulos aptly observes, in spiritualism as well as in numerous other accounts of supernatural phenomena published throughout the nineteenth century, storytelling was equated to empirical fact and narration was proposed as a reliable source of legitimacy.⁴ Several of the most influential books in the spiritualist field – such as Eliab Capron's *Modern Spiritualism*, Catherine Berry's *Experiences*, or the autobiography of spirit photographer William Mumler – are largely a collection of testimonies of eyewitnesses, whose accumulation was offered as evidence of the verity of the faith.⁵

This article aims to interrogate the role of anecdotal testimonies in nineteenth-century spiritualism. It argues that these played a twofold role in nineteenth-century spiritualism. On one side, narrative recollections of eyewitnesses offered a form of evidentiary proof that was complementary to the collection of instrument-based scientific evidences; on the other side, they circulated in spiritualist publications, creating opportunities to reach a wide public

Mortals (New York: Partridge & Brittan, 1856). See also Richard Noakes, "Instruments to Lay Hold of Spirits: Technologising the Bodies of Victorian Spiritualism," in *Bodies/Machines*, edited by Iwan Rhys Morus (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2002), 125-64.

³ Richard Noakes, "The Historiography of Psychical Research: Lessons from Histories of the Sciences," *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 72, no. 2 (2008): 65-85.

⁴ Stefan Andriopoulos, *Ghostly Apparitions: German Idealism, the Gothic Novel, and Optical Media* (New York: Zone Books, 2013). A similar observation is made by Ilana Kushan in her study of early Victorian phrenology and mesmerism. According to Kushan, forms of storytelling shaped the discourses in the public arena for experiments in this field: "literary allusions, quotations, and activities were used as evidence for the authenticity of phrenology and mesmerism and (...) these new sciences of head reading and mind reading were presented as literary activities to a Victorian audience." Ilana Kushan, "Mind Reading: Literature in the Discourse of Early Victorian Phrenology and Mesmerism," in *Victorian Literary Mesmerism*, edited by Martin Willis and Catherine Wynne (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 18.

⁵ Eliab Wilkinson Capron, *Modern Spiritualism: Its Facts and Fanaticisms, Its Consistencies and Contradictions* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1855); William H. Mumler, *The Personal Experiences of William H. Mumler in Spirit-Photography* (Boston: Colby and Rich, 1875); Catherine Berry, *Experiences in Spiritualism: A Record of Extraordinary Phenomena, Witnessed through the Most Powerful Mediums*. London: James Burns, 1876.

of readers that was made available by the emergence of a new mass market for print media. Thus, the attempt to provide evidence of the authenticity of spiritualist phenomena came together with the effort to address a wide public of readers. Ultimately, the proliferation of anecdotal testimonies sheds light on how storytelling contributed to blur the distinctions between evidence and entertainment, science and popular culture in nineteenth-century spiritualism.

Evidence and Storytelling

In spite of Beard's critique of the principles through which evidences were gathered in spiritualism, the relevance of storytelling as a source of legitimacy was to believers in spirit communication not alternative, but rather complementary with the use of other evidentiary forms, such as mechanical evidence. These two forms of empirical proofs – mechanical evidence and storytelling – did not contrast, but tended to mutually support each other in the arguments of spiritualists. In her recent book on the media history of documents, Lisa Gitelman shows how the document raised to the status of evidentiary proof in Western societies that were characterized by increasing bureaucratization and organization of work.⁶ While “modern” science substantiated with its call to the authority of mechanical proof and through the specialization of scientific expertise, print media were the center of a not less significant source of legitimacy. In this regard, the history of nineteenth-century spiritualism provides a key context where to observe how storytelling was attributed veridical meaning. In fact, the protocols and techniques that regulated the collection and circulation of narrative testimonials within spiritualism contributed to the convergence of storytelling with the evidentiary status attributed to automatic, self-recording scientific devices.

The example of spirit photography is particularly helpful to show how apparently contradictory understandings of evidence interacted and coexisted with each other. Throughout the history of spiritualism, the phenomenon of spirit photography was often greeted as an undisputable evidence supporting its claims.⁷ However, a thorough look at spiritualist sources shows that the possibility of trickery was widely recognized, and that many spiritualists regarded the

⁶ Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁷ See, among others, Clément Chéroux et al., *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Martyn Jolly, *Faces of the Living Dead: The Belief in Spirit Photography* (West New York, NJ: Mark Batty Publisher, 2006); John Harvey, *Photography and Spirit* (London: Reaktion, 2007).

photographic medium with much suspicion. The knowledge that photographs were easy to manipulate, and thus that “any photographer can easily produce ‘ghosts’ *ad libitum*,”⁸ was common sense within the spiritualist movement since at least the 1870s.⁹ Consequently, photographs were accepted as evidences only in conjunction with testimonies of professional photographers or trusted witnesses. The British spiritualist magazine *Medium and Daybreak*, for instance, reported the testimony of Julius Plaetz, a professional photographer from Kansas City, who stated that the spirit photographer Lizzie Carter had been taking photographs at his gallery, and that he had not found any evidence of fraud.¹⁰ Moreover, particular importance was given to the fact that someone could identify the spirits on the plate as bearing the likeness of a departed relative or friend. Mumler’s *Personal Experiences* is a particularly good example to understand the weight of this identification in establishing the authenticity of spirit photography; a large part of this memoir, in fact, is based on reports of the testimonies of those who solemnly stated to have recognized the spirit images.¹¹

The case of spirit photography demonstrates that written testimonies of eyewitnesses were a major source of legitimization for spiritualists, also when the role of mechanical objectivity was equally at stake. Indeed, writing was often characterized *per se* as an activity that was akin to the collection of machine-based evidentiary proofs. Although writing is usually regarded as an act of human creation rather than the producer of objective knowledge, spiritualist techniques of direct and automatic writing explicitly linked it to mechanical objectivity. In her dissertation on automatic writing in France, Alexandra Bacopoulos-Viau has provided a very useful case study of this process, showing how French spiritism (in particular through its founder and central figure, Allan Kardec) characterized the written word as a source of scientific legitimization. Through the standardization of techniques of automatic writing, by which the spirit dictated to the medium in trance, Kardec professed to have provided empirical proofs that were explicitly likened to the collection of scientific evidences by mechanical

⁸ Fritz, *Where Are the Dead? Or, Spiritualism Explained* (Manchester: A. Ireland, 1873), 81. Emphasis in original.

⁹ Daniel Dunglas Home, *Lights and Shadows of Spiritualism* (New York: G.W. Carleton & Co., 1877), 360-66.

¹⁰ Julius Plaetz, "Julius Plaetz, Photographer, on Spirit Photography," *The Medium and Daybreak* 13, no. 628 (1882): 231. In other cases, the authenticity of spirit photographs was confirmed directly by the spirits, through séance communications or direct writing. William Stainton Moses, *Spirit-Identity* (London: W.H. Harrison, 1879), 61.

¹¹ Mumler, *The Personal Experiences*.

means.¹² For Kardec, writing was a vehicle for collecting evidence as well as to disseminate them to a wide public that was accessible through the medium of printing. The supposed evidences were in fact broadcasted to a consistent readership through his books, which went through numerous editions in the nineteenth centuries, and in the journal he edited, *La Revue Spirite*.¹³

While relying on the status of trance mediumship as a mechanical and objective agency, spirit-authored writings also employed strategies and genres that were typical of popular literature of the time. In these texts - dictated by spirits with the intercession of a medium, or written directly by a medium through techniques of automatic or direct writing - readers could find not only a confirmation of their belief in spirit communication, but also an uplifting, literary pastime.¹⁴ Numerous literary genres, such as poetry, the historical novel, autobiographies, and war correspondence were composed through the authorship of spirits.¹⁵ The most common works of this kind were memoirs of spirits, who were in the privileged position to describe their existence on earth and in the afterlife.¹⁶

Not only spirit-authored texts, but also other writings of spiritualist interest were characterized by the use of anecdotal narratives to convince as well as to entertain the reader. For instance, biographies of mediums, which reached a

¹² Alexandra Bacopoulos-Viau, *Scripting the Mind: Automatic Writing in France, 1857-1930* (Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2013).

¹³ Kardec's *Le Livre des Esprits* (Book of Spirits), first published in 1857, went through twenty-two editions by 1875 in France alone, and was translated into foreign languages, including English. By early 1866, his journal, the *Revue Spirite*, counted as much as 1800 subscribers. See John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 113.

¹⁴ Senex, "The Diffusion of Spiritualism: Mediumship in Literature," *The Medium and Daybreak* 13, no. 633 (1882), 313.

¹⁵ Helen Sword, *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Tatiana Kontou, *Spiritualism and Women's Writing: From the Fin de Siècle to the Neo-Victorian* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁶ Examples of spirit-authored writings include E. C. Henck, *Spirit Voices*; Anon., *Life Beyond the Grave: Described by a Spirit, through a Writing Medium* (London: E. W. Allen, 1876); "A Book Written and Illustrated by Spirits," *The Medium and Daybreak* 9, no. 420 (1878): 251; Gino Fanciullacci, *Il pellegrinaggio nei cieli: Poema dettato da uno spirito al medium Gino Fanciullacci* (Firenze: Arte della Stampa, 1881).

high level of standardization during the second half of the nineteenth century, often featured colourful anecdotes that centered on the presence and agency of spirits around us. George Redman's *Mystic Hours*, for instance, was full of adventurous episodes about his career as a medium, recounted with literary verve.¹⁷ Similarly, British medium J.J. Morse reported a number of colourful anecdotes from his American journey, recounted as a travel narrative - a staple of popular literature of the time.¹⁸

Like for the case of spirit-authored texts, examining biographies of mediums sheds light on how spiritualists found legitimization not only through the experimental patterns of positivist science, but also by using strategies

¹⁷ One time, before he left New York for a journey to Buffalo, Redman recounts that he was compelled by his spirit guardian to walk down Broadway toward Battery Park. Upon reaching Cortland Street, he was suddenly turned into a store where he was made to take a box lying on the counter and then take a twenty dollar bill from his pocket and hand it to the attendant. Later, when Redman discovered the box contained a Colt revolver, he received instructions from his father's spirit to load the weapon in order to save his life. "Here," thought Redman "is a pretty specimen of a spiritual teacher: on one side of my breast I am carrying sentiments of peace, progress, happiness, and good will; on the other a loaded revolver." On a night soon after, he had the opportunity to use it when he was assaulted by two bandits on his way home: "At this moment I felt a stunning sensation as if struck by some heavy instrument, and fell staggering against a door nearby. I now perceived my hand jerk suddenly, and though partially stupefied, I had sufficient perception to see the ruffians backing from me with their hands before their faces; then dodging into a by-way, they disappeared. By this time I knew all; my arm was still raised, and in my hand the revolver. [...] On retiring to bed that night, I felt I should rest ever after secure from harm, and truly appreciated the guardianship of him, who was happy to call me child." George A. Redman, *Mystic Hours: Or, Spiritual Experiences* (New York: C. Partridge, 1859), 247-48.

¹⁸ Morse recounted, for instance, that the train appeared to him more similar to an elegant boudoir than a railway car, with cushions for the feet, iced water to drink and an attendant to assist you. There was no state church or national religion, and Morse also noticed that the numerous confessions were often characterised by sonorousness and display. In many states, divorces could be easily obtained. The social mobility of American society was underlined in a quite conventional way: "a barefooted boy to-day, a help on a Western farm to-morrow, and President of the Republic the week after, then back again to private life, is a fair illustration of my idea." J. J. Morse, *Leaves from My Life: A Narrative of Personal Experiences in the Career of a Servant of the Spirits* (London: James Burns, 1877), 60-62.

employed within the realm of popular culture.¹⁹ As David Turley underlines, anecdotes have not only a narrative, but also an important rhetorical function: they contribute to make a statement about the character's nature, profession, and agency.²⁰ In other words, anecdotes in popular biographies function as narrative patterns that provide legitimacy to the protagonist, as well as to the class of individuals that the protagonist represents.²¹ Thus, the establishment of a tradition of biographies and autobiographies of mediums in the nineteenth century contributed to support spiritualism's claims regarding spirit communication, mediumship, and their role in the formation of knowledge about the otherworld. Recurring elements in the mediums' life (such as the stories about the mediumistic powers being revealed already during their early childhood) were linked to established beliefs about mediumship. They contributed, at the same time, to frame the works in the biographical genre and to furnish further evidence of the reality and coherence of spiritualist claims. The corroboration of these claims was offered to the public through the entertaining and accessible formula of colorful anecdotes, standardizing biographical accounts of mediums as a kind of literary subgenre with recurring conventions and patterns. As discussed in the next section, such entertaining nature contributed to the dissemination of spiritualist beliefs within the public sphere and through the channels of a burgeoning market for print media.

Anecdotal Testimonies and the Diffusion of the Spirit Word

Why were human testimonies so important to spiritualists, and which implications do they have for the diffusion of the spirit word? In order to answer this question, one needs to consider the extent to which spiritualists engaged in attempts to make the messages received from the spirit word heard to the widest public possible. As I showed elsewhere, spirit séances were often conducted in public, on the stage of theaters and public halls, before spectators that understood themselves as such.²² Spiritualist mediums, moreover, employed managers to

¹⁹ For other examples, see Joseph Armitage, "An Autobiographical Sketch," *The Medium and Daybreak* 16, no. 783 (1885): 226-31; Daniel Dunglas Home, *Incidents in My Life* (London: F. Pitman, 1864); Berry, *Experiences in Spiritualism*.

²⁰ David Turley, "A Usable Life: Representations of Abraham Lincoln," in *Imitating Art: Essays on Biography*, edited by David Ellis (London: Pluto, 1993), 53-66.

²¹ Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

²² Simone Natale, "The Medium on the Stage: Trance and Performance in Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 9, no. 3 (2011): 239-55

administer their presence in the public sphere in the most convenient way.²³ Even when séances were conducted in domestic environments, participation was open to strangers and guests who were interested or curious about spiritualism.²⁴ In this context, anecdotal testimonies concurred to the diffusion of the spirit word by providing appealing narratives with the potential to be disseminated widely through print media, and to attract the attention of increasingly larger masses of readers that throughout the nineteenth century participated in a growing book market. Anecdotes drew on a form of narration that was well-established in popular literature of the time: particularly in the biographic genre, which became increasingly popular throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, anecdotes were a highly structured form of popular storytelling.²⁵ Relying on such established literary patterns, testimonies of spiritualists should be ultimately regarded as forms of media narratives that contributed to the popularity of spiritualism in societies that were increasingly shaped by popular culture, consumerism, and the cultural industry.²⁶

²³ Simone Natale, "Spiritual Stars: Religion and Celebrity in the Career of Spiritualist Mediums," *Celebrity Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 94-96. On the same topic, see also Simone Natale, "Mediums and Stars: Mediumship, Show Business, and Celebrity in Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism," in *The Spiritualist Movement: Speaking with the Dead in America and around the World*, edited by Christopher Moreman (Santa Barbara, CA.: Praeger, 2013), 237-51.

²⁴ The famous medium Catherine Berry, for instance, observed that "whenever I had a séance with a good medium, and that was intervals of only a few days, I made a point of inviting my friends to participate in it, and also received enquirers who were introduced to me. The sitters at my séances have been neither few nor unimportant, so that my experiments have been conducted in public." Catherine Berry, *Experiences in Spiritualism*. I discuss the blurring of public and private space in domestic séances in Chapter 2 of my forthcoming book, Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).

²⁵ Joe Law and Linda K. Hughes, *Biographical Passages*; Michael Benton, *Literary Biography: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); William H. Epstein, *Recognizing Biography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); John Batchelor, *The Art of Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

²⁶ As Helen Fulton points out, "media narratives do not exist (...) simply to entertain us, the consumer, to tell us stories in order to amuse us, or to provide us with a service and a range of choices from which we can make our selection. They are constructed in order to support the huge business empires that run most of the media outlets, geared specifically to creating profits from the commodification of media products." Helen Fulton, *Narrative and Media* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

Historian of media and American culture James Carey underlines that the idea of evangelical broadcasting, an element from the Christian imagination, contributed to shape the conceptualization of communication in the United States since the nineteenth century. In his essay *A History of the Future*, co-authored with John Quirk, he observes that advances in technology, such as the telegraph, were rhetorically assimilated to the evangelical spread of the Christian faith.²⁷ The notion that a nonsectarian, uniform Christianity would be possible in New England because of the absence of European institutions and traditions became entangled with a missionary understanding of apparently secular issues, such as technological development: “in the nineteenth century, dramatic advances in technology and industrialization were seen as an analogy to the spread of American religion, so that the spiritual improvement wrought by Christianity was linked to those ‘internal improvements,’ particularly improvements in transportation and communication. By midcentury canals, railways, and the telegraph became the most important forms of missionary activity.”²⁸

Spiritualists regarded print media as playing a similar missionary role. Spiritualist pamphlets, books, and periodicals were considered by many the chief vehicle through which spirit communication could be diffused to the world at large.²⁹ It is important to recall that the nineteenth century was the time of massive changes in the circulation and marketing of print goods.³⁰ By the 1850s, books had largely become an industrial commodity in both Europe and the United

²⁷ James W. Carey and John J. Quirk, "The History of the Future," In *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) , 173-200.

²⁸ James W. Carey and John J. Quirk, "The History of the Future," 136.

²⁹ Historian of American spiritualism Anne Braude points out that spiritualist periodicals responded to a function of community-building within the spiritualist movement. Since the nineteenth century, the press provided an arena where people from different geographic areas but common interests could learn about each other's existence and enter in contact through the columns of periodicals. Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

³⁰ Although the invention of the printing press dates back to the fifteenth century, it was during the nineteenth century that print commodities ceased to be based on an artisanal mode of production, and increasingly adopted industrial techniques. Laurel Brake, *Print in Transition, 1850-1910: Studies in Media and Book History* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jeremy Stolow, *Orthodox by Design: Judaism, Print Politics, and the Arts and Crafts Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 20-21.

States. Improvements in the manufacture of books and in the mode of production, as well as the expansion of the potential market due to the spread of literacy and a rising population, stimulated an astounding growth in the volume of sales.³¹ In this context, the spiritualist movement flooded the book market with books, pamphlets and journals.³² Anecdotal reports of séances and of spiritualist experiences represented a key content that filled the pages of these publications. By circulating written anecdotal testimonies, spiritualists hoped to turn their private explorations into a public and collective act that would spread the impact of their communication with the spirit world.

Spirits were believed to be not only sympathetic, but directly involved in the flourishing activity of disseminating the word of spirits through print media. This was sometimes explicitly characterized as “broadcasting” – a term that resonates widely in twentieth-century media culture.³³ The Ohio spiritualist entrepreneur Hudson Tuttle, for instance, praised the movement’s ability to broadcast its periodicals over the land, and suggested that its astounding success in spreading the new truth would not be accountable “unless the myriad spirits of the departed, standing behind the scenes of their invisibility, push on the work.”³⁴ A similar idea was mentioned in a leaflet published in London in 1872 under the title “Seed Corn.” The text, produced under the auspices of the British spiritualist publisher James Burns,³⁵ aimed to provide believers in spiritualism with a detailed

³¹ Susan Geary, "The Domestic Novel as a Commercial Commodity: Making a Best Seller in the 1850s," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 70, no. 3 (1976), 366-67. On the rise of the book as a commodity in Britain, see David McKitterick, *The Cambridge History of the Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³² Ann Braude, "News from the Spirit World: A Checklist of American Spiritualist Periodicals, 1847-1900." *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 99, no. 2 (1990): 399-462.

³³ See, for instance, Edward William Cox, *Spiritualism Answered by Science: With Proofs of a Psychic Force* (London: Longman and Company, 1872), vii; William Cleveland, *The Religion of Modern Spiritualism and Its Phenomena: Compared with the Christian Religion and Its Miracles* (Cincinnati: Light of Truth Pub. Co., 1896), 17.

³⁴ Hudson Tuttle, *Arcana of Spiritualism: A Manual of Spiritual Science and Philosophy* (Boston: Adams & Co., 1871), 431.

³⁵ Burns’ publishing activities were conducted under the auspices of the Progressive Library and Spiritual Institution, located in Southampton Row in Holborn, London. See Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 45; Jeffrey D. Lavoie, *The Theosophical Society: The History of a Spiritualist Movement* (Boca Raton:

explanation of the best strategy to disseminate the spirit message: distributing periodicals, leaflets and pamphlets on spiritualism at the most affordable price. Spiritualists, it was claimed, had to work all together to broadcast information about their belief. The best way to do so was to devote efforts, time, and money to the circulation of tracts, papers, and publications. The leaflet proposed thus a “new programme” for the spiritualist enterprise:

1st, Circulate tracts by millions. Let them be short, and to the point, such as can be afforded for sixpence a hundred. Each hundred, judiciously circulated, would secure at least one subscriber to a Spiritual paper.

2ndly, Circulate Spiritual papers. Let each subscriber take two where he or she now takes one, and give away to all who can be induced to read or circulate them.

3rdly, Free circles—public and private; also local, county, state, and national mass meetings, where spirits and their mediums shall not be trammelled by would-be leaders, who fear erratic, striking, and comical manifestations, which are just the thing to draw the thoughtless crowd, and enable wise Spiritualists to scatter in tracts, papers, and publications, the seed which will, in due time, produce a bountiful harvest.

Carry out the above programme, and tracts, papers, and converts will increase tenfold faster than by patronising leaders, creeds, and expensive organisations.³⁶

The leaflet encouraged spiritualists to help broadening their faith by contributing to the diffusion of spiritualist print media, and advised them on the best ways to promote the spirit word. It was for this purpose that this and other “Seed Corn” tracts had been prepared “to scatter broadcast over the land.” Together with spiritualist periodicals, books and pamphlets, these tracts were proposed as the chief means by which the spirit word would be broadcasted in the public sphere.

BrownWalker Press, 2012), 152-53; Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 24.

³⁶ James Burns, "Seed Corn," 1.

Interestingly, according to the leaflet, the “new programme” had been allegedly communicated by the spirits themselves, through the intercession of a medium. This is not unusual in American and European spiritualism. Like professional editors, spirits often gave precise indications of how a publication could be marketed. Samuel Watson, a Methodist priest who converted to spiritualism, reported for instance that the spirits had agreed to suspend the publication of the *Spiritual Magazine* in order that the *Voice of Truth*, another spiritualist journal, could be successful, and had assigned him to the task of preparing and publishing a new book. When Watson finished this work, the spirits claimed their authorship and declared to be “anxious to see the work appear.”³⁷ Another instance in which spirits provided advices on publishing strategies can be found in the career of Allan Kardec, the founder of French spiritism. Before starting the publication of the *Revue Spirit*, who had to become a reference point for French spiritists, Kardec reported to have asked the spirits which approach he should follow. As historian of spiritism John Warne Monroe noted, the answer revealed “an acute sense of what made publications on spirit phenomena appealing”:³⁸ the spirits suggested the journal should appeal to curiosity, containing both the serious and the entertaining, in order to attract the men of science as well as the ordinary reader. Not only spiritualists but also the spirits, in other words, were able and willing to benefit from the new opportunities created by the emergence of popular literature and culture.

Conclusion

This essay argues that the relevance accorded to the publication of human testimonies in spiritualism – which attracted the denunciation of skeptics such as psychologist George M. Beard – was instrumental in providing evidences as well as in spreading the word of the spirit to a public of readers. Spiritualists professed that the accumulation of knowledge about the spirit world, similarly to scientific knowledge, could only be possible if séance experiences and experiments were publicized as widely as possible. Producing written texts that had the potential to be popular was therefore a sign of their commitment to the spirits. Able to convince, but also to entertain the reader, anecdotal testimonies had a key advantage over other forms of evidentiary proofs supporting the claims of spiritualism: they allowed to be reported in spiritualist publications, thereby spreading the word of spiritualism to a wide readership. The proliferation of

³⁷ Samuel Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism: Its Phenomena and Philosophy* (Boston: Colby & Rich, 1880), 25.

³⁸ Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*, 113.

anecdotal testimonies in spiritualist texts, in this regard, hints at the relevance of storytelling in the diffusion of beliefs about religious matters and scientific issues within the public sphere. Contributing to the insertion of spiritualism's religious and scientific endeavors in a burgeoning popular culture, the narrative character of these testimonies supported the movement's claims of authenticity as well as its capacity to appeal to large masses of people in the Victorian era.

Acknowledgements

Research that lead to the publication of this essay has been funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and by the Italian Academy of Columbia University, New York. Minor parts of this article draw and elaborate from materials to be published in my forthcoming book, *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).

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