

Spiritual Telegraph Project

Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, I am currently directing a research project investigating the relationship between the rise of Spiritualism and the spread of electrically-mediated technologies in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world, beginning with the telegraph.

This project extends outward from my interest in the relationship between, on the one hand, the circulation of ideas and practices of spirit communication in the nineteenth century, and on the other, the institution and transatlantic spread of telegraphy, the first significant industrial application of electricity and a harbinger of our contemporary networks of global communication. Through an analysis of scientific, religious and popular texts from the 1850s to the 1880s (roughly speaking) this project considers three dimensions of the Spiritual Telegraph:

- the role played by telegraphically mediated telecommunications systems in the expansion and institutionalization of the Spiritualist movement, as well as in the growing visibility of the movement in the emerging international public sphere of telegraphically-mediated journalism;
- the sedimentation into the Spiritualist imagination of the electrical vocabularies and metaphors of telegraph cables and nerves, and related notions of conduction, sympathetic vibration, signal interruption, etc.
- the material culture of electrical devices used within seance practice to demonstrate (or disprove) the existence of the spirit world, and also to register the effects of spirit possession on the bodies of spirit mediums.

I am currently collaborating on this project with Dr. Carly Machado, a post-doctoral fellow in the Faculty of Social Sciences at UERJ, the State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Together we are tracking selected trajectories that allow for the comparison of the (sometimes similar, sometimes contrasting) ways the Spiritual Telegraph was configured in some of the key metropolitan centres for Spiritualist activity: New York, London, Paris, and Rio. This work is being developed in collaboration with other research initiatives focused on religion and technology, and also the cultural history of electricity.

Links: Coming Soon.