

Sunday Review | OPINION

# How We Find Our Way to the Dead

By PETER MANSEAU OCT. 28, 2017

I don't believe in ghosts, but I see them all the time. Social media gets spookier every day. Among Facebook's more than 40 million deceased users, an acquaintance who passed away two years ago has a profile page that remains quite active. Dozens of people who knew her post memories and emoji hearts, speaking to the dead woman as if she were only as near or as far as we all are these days — out there somewhere, behind another screen.

According to the Pew Research Center, nearly a fifth of Americans believe they have “seen or been in the presence of” a wandering soul; nearly a third report that “they have felt in touch with someone who has already died.” Polls from the past suggest such numbers hold steady across the generations. To be captivated by the uncanny has been a national pastime at least since Washington Irving celebrated the “fearful pleasure” of listening to tales of “haunted fields, and haunted brooks, and haunted bridges, and haunted houses.”

But now it seems we are experiencing something new. Today even skeptics live in the presence of the departed, the disembodied and the illusory — internet shadows that are no less influential for not being real.

Technology makes such eerie interactions possible, and that's the paradox of the pervasive presence of scientific wonders in our daily lives: We carry futuristic fact-checking supercomputers in our pockets, but they don't make us any less superstitious, susceptible to trickery or caught in the thrall of our deep-down Dark Ages tendencies. In fact, they seem to do the opposite, relocating our credulity to any new medium promising to bridge the gap that keeps us from whatever or whomever we've lost.

The ubiquity of smartphones as access points to the collective cognitive realm some call the

noosphere — from the Greek word “nous” for “mind” — perhaps makes our increased preoccupation with unseen powers inevitable. Yet this is not the first time radical advances in technology have creaked the attic door open for imaginary encounters. While we naturally think of spirits in spiritual terms, the ghosts of a culture are shaped equally by its machines.

When Samuel Morse sent his first telegraph message between Baltimore and Washington in 1844 — the biblical verse “What hath God wrought” — among his most enthusiastic supporters were those who believed such missives could be transmitted not just across great distances, but to and from the great beyond.

In the middle of the 19th century, the rise of Spiritualism, the belief that the living can communicate with the dead, was bound up with the era’s astonishing technological developments. The first nationally known Spiritualists, Leah, Kate and Maggie Fox of Hydesville, N.Y., explicitly compared their interactions with the dead to electric pulses sent along a wire. “God’s Telegraph,” the eldest Fox sister said, “antedated that of Samuel F. B. Morse.”

Believers soon started a newspaper called *The Spiritual Telegraph*, “devoted to the illustration of spiritual intercourse,” while another leading Spiritualist, Andrew Jackson Davis (known as the Seer of Poughkeepsie), claimed that séances were most effective when participants were joined together by a copper cord.

Before the trans-Atlantic telegraph cable, Davis proposed that the quickest way to send messages across the ocean would be through a system of spiritual switchboards, in which the living in New York would convey a message to the American dead, who would pass it on to the dead of England, who in turn would make reports to the living of London.

The founder of *The New-York Tribune*, Horace Greeley, was rumored to be so taken by this idea that he sought Spiritualist correspondents. Unfortunately for Greeley, it was noted at the time that “the spirits utterly refuse to serve the press.”

The telegraph was not alone as an unlikely stimulant of “spiritual intercourse.” With understanding of electricity growing across the country, believers in invisible forces argued that it buttressed their claims. Mediums called themselves “batteries,” essential for supplying the power needed to send the longest of long-distance communiqués. Photography, too, with its promise of producing images depicting details hidden to the naked eye, offered ghost hunters a new and powerful tool.

In the wake of the Civil War’s unprecedented loss of life, a mania for spectral images seized the nation when the photographer William Mumler claimed he could capture the souls of the

dead with his camera. First in Boston and then in New York, Mumler convinced many that portrait sessions in his studio were attended by the spirits of paying customers' lamented spouses, children and friends.

Mumler's high-profile arrest for fraud put Spiritualism on trial in the courts and the public square. Though he had been caught red-handed selling a "spirit photograph" to a New York City marshal, his lawyer mounted an ingenious defense, appealing both to the precedent of spirits appearing in the Bible and to the growing faith in technology's ability to accomplish the impossible.

"The taking of these pictures," Mumler's attorney argued, "is a new feature in photography, yet in its infancy surely, but gradually and slowly progressing to greater perfection in the future, requiring for such perfection time and a scientific knowledge of the power that is operating."

After his surprise acquittal, Mumler went on to take his most infamous picture: a portrait of Mary Todd Lincoln posed with the alleged spirit of the murdered president.

Belief that the dead took forms waiting to be discovered was not a fringe view but a commonly held religious position. Some estimates made in the 1860s put the number of Americans with Spiritualist sympathies over 10 million — a third of the population.

The pace at which new technologies became part of the 19th-century landscape helps explain why. The telegraph, electricity, photography: All of it was new. All of it was baffling. All of it seemed utterly fantastic until suddenly it was everywhere, making it difficult for many to separate genuine marvels from showmanship and sham.

The spiritual confusion prompted by these innovations played out for decades. In 1843, when Morse petitioned the federal government to support the telegraph, a congressman argued that if the government provided resources to explore sending electric messages, it ought to fund the pseudoscience of mesmerism as well. In 1869, a State Supreme Court judge and several legitimate photographers testified on Mumler's behalf, all noting that it had not been proved that photography could not do what he claimed.

In our own technology-haunted times, it's worth asking how our lives both online and offline will soon be influenced by discoveries and manipulations far beyond what we can currently imagine. One hopes that future citizens of the noosphere will see through the kinds of digital deceptions we endure today as easily as we might debunk a spirit photograph. Until then, we can only wait for our ability to detect invented entities to catch up with our talent for creating them.

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