

# Contacting dead people online: The hidden Victorian rationality behind using The Internet for paranormal activities.

Contactando a los muertos en línea: la racionalidad victoriana oculta tras el uso de Internet para realizar actividades paranormales.

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## RESUMEN

The aim of this article is to find the rational foundations behind the belief in the paranormal, and to understand why some people still believe that it is possible to use scientific devices like computers or smart phones to contact dead people. This is especially interesting, because in this case we are dealing with the fact the same way as in the Victorian age, people use technical advances to reinforce their convictions on the existence of life beyond life. In this sense one important task is to realize the role of technological gears in supporting this kind of shared rationality. Unexpectedly, science has not undermined supernatural thought but it has served for reinforcing it. It looks like the more advanced the civilization the more possibilities it turns into the search of alternative and extravagant conceptions of the world.

**Key Words:** Media, Victorians, Internet, the paranormal, folklore.

## ABSTRACT

El objetivo de este artículo es encontrar el soporte racional que subyace bajo la creencia en lo paranormal, y comprender porque algunas personas creen que es posible utilizar dispositivos tecnológicos como computadoras o teléfonos inteligentes para contactar a los muertos. Esto es especialmente interesante, ya que nos encontramos ante el hecho de que de la misma manera que en la época Victoriana, mucha gente utiliza los avances técnicos para fortalecer sus convicciones sobre la existencia de una vida más allá de la vida. En este sentido, una tarea importante es comprender el rol de los dispositivos tecnológicos en el fortalecimiento de este tipo de racionalidad compartida. Inesperadamente, la ciencia no ha socavado el pensamiento sobrenatural sino que ha servido para reforzarlo. Parece que cuanto más avanza una civilización hay más posibilidades del surgimiento de nuevas concepciones alternativas y extravagantes sobre el mundo.

**Palabras clave:** Medios, Época Victoriana, Internet, eventos paranormales, folklore.

## Introducción

Currently, we are witnesses of a more interconnected and global society that has enhanced the world so greatly that people can share information around the planet in seconds. Individuals have considerably increased their education level and their quality of life, but unexpectedly, at the same time, the faith in paranormal phenomena<sup>1</sup> is still present in modern Western society. Indeed, the belief in alternative theories has been present along with the scientific knowledge in almost every period. In Plato's time, Greeks went to oracles and priests to know the future or to forecast the suitability of a specific action, like making war or peace with an opposed city. Long before the appearance of magic boards like the Ouija or the table turning, many people believed in magnetism and mesmerism and there were many scientists who attempted to give convincing support to these "eccentric" theories (Darnton, 1968). Even in the XXI, The Age of Information Society, people still credit the existence of UFOs and ghosts.

The object of this paper is not to discuss if there is a conflict between science and paranormal beliefs, but on the contrary, to find the rationality, or in other words, the rational backing behind the belief in the paranormal, particularly in modern Western societies in which it is possible to use great scientific devices like computers or smart phones. This is especially interesting, because in this case we are dealing with the fact the same way as Victorians, people use technical advances to strengthen their convictions on the existence of life beyond life. Unexpectedly, science has not undermined supernatural thought but it has served for reinforcing it. It looks like the more advanced the civilization the more possibilities it turns into the search of alternative and extravagant conceptions of the world. In spite of the fact that there is enough bibliography dedicated to the study of the paranormal in Victorian and Modern ages there is none that has analyzed the connection between these two periods when talking about the relation between technology and supernatural belief. So this paper intends to fill this gap. Regarding the methodology this was a research based on the analysis of exhaustive literature and the recollection of cases published on newspapers and social media. An important effort was consumed on recollecting quantitative evidence on literature that shows how an important amount of people still believe in the paranormal. However, the main purpose was to find correlations between how people, in both historical ages, use science and technological devices to support their believes in supernatural phenomena like talking to dead people.

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<sup>1</sup> In terms of this paper, a paranormal phenomenon is an event that is beyond the scope of scientific understanding, and it could include activities like talking to dead people, telekinesis, and seeing ghosts, etc.

## The paranormal belief in Victorian age

It is usual to assert that the birth of modern Spiritualism in Western culture<sup>2</sup> occurred in 1848 in Hydeville, New York where two daughters, members of the Fox family, began to communicate with a paranormal entity across an elaborate system of rap code (Lyons, 2009: 89). Note that even in its very beginnings mediums needed an indirect system to talk with the dead ones. Rapidly, Spiritualism came across to the Atlantic Ocean and shortly it was renamed as Spiritism, but at the same time it evolved not only as an exhibition but also as a religion. When Allan Kardec, Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, was working on publishing pedagogic and grammar books in 1854, he attended for the first time a "table-turning" or "table tipping" séance, in that period these socialite exhibitions were very common in London and Paris. Rivail was profound influenced by the movement. After reading some texts about the theme he decided to publish "Le livre des esprits" (The book of Spiritism) under the name of Allan Kardec. This work became a best seller instantly, increasing the interest for knowing about contacting defunct people and attending paranormal séances (Mann, 1919: 01).

Spiritualism became very popular and spread along the continent and it went back to America, but enclosed in a more sophisticated form, and with a new name "Spiritism". Many well-educated people got attracted to this new religion. When Francisco I. Madero, former Mexican president from 1911-1913, traveled back to Mexico from France, he returned as a writing medium. He discovered Spiritism in Paris in 1891 through the work of Allan Kardec and attended a séance where he was informed that he was able to write messages from dead people. Living in his parents' ranch in the Mexican state of Coahuila, Madero wrote from 1901-1908 several letters with messages from dead relatives and famous defunct Mexican personalities (Rosas Robles, 1999). Besides this story, we must recall an important fact: spirits need a pen and paper, or in the case of the "slate writing", a blackboard and a chalk stick for communicating. It is not just that we pray to talk to them, but there is an inner rationality in the whole process: there must be an information device, no matter the naïve or complex of its nature, from paper and ink into a more elaborated method like a modern "ghost box". The prerequisite of using artifacts for indirect communication will be an unchanged characteristic until our days.

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<sup>2</sup> There is no consensus about which term is more appropriated, "Spiritualism" or "Spiritism" or even if they have the same meaning. However, for this paper, I chose to use "Spiritism" because due to the huge popularity of Alan Kardec's book, it was wider used in Europe during the XIX century, but it is important to remark that the action of talking to dead people, at least in the XIX, was first called "Spiritualism".

### **Science and The Paranormal: A Victorian gothic tale.**

There is something particular about Spiritism and Allan Kardec's story: the beliefs in paranormal communication turned out to be very popular throughout a specific period of many great scientific and technological advances in Europe. During the XIX century, the main cities in the continent became industrialized, and many school museums were instituted. Great scientists like Charles Darwin and Pasteur achieved significant advances to understand life and to undermine irrational belief in the paranormal and even in religion.

The Victorian age was a period not only of outstanding technical advances, but an era that actually developed a new way of interpreting data. Sherlock Holmes' narrative represents not only a fictional character but also another way of understanding information, making hypothesis and finding causalities especially in legal, criminal, and medical areas (Frank, 2003). When Spiritism appeared, no matter if the spiritist used science to support their séances for getting money from their clients, or if they really believed in paranormal activities or, why not, both; what is undoubtedly important is that they envisioned a way to legitimize their convictions by using the same methodology of science and operating sophisticated technology for finding evidences of life after death. In the very beginning of Spiritism, mediums, mentalists, and paranormal researchers shared one goal: founding a scientific or semi-scientific core for supporting the authenticity of supernatural events.

In Paranormal shows the use of technology extended quickly. In Spain, they were seen as popular shows where it could have been possible to witness "dancing tables" and "automatic writing". The promise of attending supernatural phenomena was enough to gather crowds (Abend, 2004: 510). In other cases, people used to consult mediums confidentially because they needed to contact dead relatives to get information about unfinished tasks left in life or only to express their affection. After The First World War, Spiritism and other similar beliefs like Theosophy continued very well known and practiced in London (Mann, 1919: 01). People who had recently lost a relative were always potential clients for mediums. A famous one was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, paradoxically the creator of the most rational and methodical private investigator ever. After the death of his son, Doyle dedicated many efforts to prove the existence of the life beyond death. One of them was the book "The Wanderings of a Spiritualist", which was a personal account of Doyle's experiences with the paranormal.

By the time, many doctors, lawyers, and public employers turned to Spiritism. They attempted to give to their beliefs a certain grade of empirical confirmation. Several experiments were conducted in order to convince public opinion that it was possible to establish a sort of contact with supernatural entities. Many of the paranormal believers were pioneers in using novel technologies like photography and telegraphs as devices for supernatural research. Today, we can evoke the existence of a significant variety of devices and applications created for the same reason: to demonstrate the

existence of ghosts. In a certain way, paranormal researchers share the same rationality with their colleagues from the past.

Many spiritualists wrote academic essays about how this credence could be compatible with science, especially with evolutionary Darwinian theory. This was the case of Arabella Buckley and her work title "The soul, and the Theory of Evolution", in where she attempted to describe the spiritual dimension of evolution (Lightman, 2010: 244). Even Charles Darwin and John Tyndall were in contact with Spiritism theories, especially through the work of William Crooked, they both even attended at least one séance, but after that they declared this matter a fraud. Nonetheless, this fact gives important evidence of how significant this movement was at that time, that even two of the great scientists of Victorian age took some time to learn something about it. In spite of the fact that for many people it is clear that paranormal phenomenon only exists in the minds of those who claim to see ghosts and demons, there is a strong and long tradition of parapsychological research conducted by universities around the world (Hyman, 1986: 47). Since the XIX, there has existed a tendency in trying to justify or, in other words, to give a scientific status to the study of the paranormal. There has been a strong feeling that it is possible to talk with dead people or to experience paranormal phenomena with the proper use of technological devices: like the Ouija board or the spirit trumpets. There are significant cases of serious scientifics and inventors like Thomas Edison that intended to develop devices for establishing communication with entities (Robertson, 2005: 32).

## **Ghostly media**

During Victorian age, several artifacts flourished for contacting the dead ones, and during the decades they have enhanced and became more sophisticated. Devices like Ouija boards, automatic writing, and spirit photography constituted a new kind of media, a "ghostly one" (McCorristine, 2010). By the year of 1918, believing in paranormal continued being usual, mainly because more people were interested in contacting lost relatives at war. That year the Society for the Study of Paranormal Pictures was founded, and by those days séances became more refined and new paraphernalia, like ectoplasm, was added to the show (McCorristine, 2010: 224).

According to tradition, M. Plancette achieved the invention of the Ouija board in 1853; notwithstanding, there is any evidence of his existence. This is one of the many obscure facts about this device. Another one is about the name itself; "oui" in French and "ja" in German are "yes" in English. Maybe in a way, this is a tacit confirmation that "yes" you are contacting an entity from another dimension. The Ouija board was used extensible along the continent, and in the next years traveled to The United States. It was in this country that this device began to be commercialized and fabricated

massively (Myrick, 2000: 37). In this case, we can stand out an important fact, the board spread significantly in America by the years of The Civil War. Undoubtedly, as in the case of The First World War, mediums were busy during The Secession War between the Yankees and the Confederates.

Like we noted in earlier pages, in many cases people who dedicated to Spiritualism (In America) or Spiritism (In Europe) were educated, sometimes with professions like lawyers or medics. Many of them dedicated much time not only to read about how this belief could change life or their community but also trying to design technical instruments to capture the messages from the life beyond death more efficiently, and to confirm to the public that these events were indeed real. They were attempting to measure the invisible (Gutierrez, 2009: 36). In a time where science was working hard to understand phenomenon like magnetism and electricity, mediums and paranormal investigators used these forces to establish connections with the paranormal world. Spiritualists were obsessed with the constructions of mechanism and machines that could legitimize their work. That is the case of the work of Robert Hare and his book “Experimental Investigations of the Spirit Manifestations” published in 1856, in where several machines are depicted carefully, enabling replication (Gutierrez, 2009: 58). Some mediums elaborated sophisticated items similar to the ones of Hare. This was part of the mainstream exhibition, people assisted fairs on both sides of the Atlantic to admire automators or mechanized robots, and sometimes they got frightened at observing mysterious images of devils and ghosts from unknown origin projected into the walls. This was the case of the famous phantasmagoria magic lantern.

### **The survival of the paranormal in XXI.**

The last 15 years have been witnesses of a truthful “resurrection” of paranormal culture in media: movies, comics, video games all related with ghosts, the Ouija board or zombie stuff. But along with the merchandise that can traditionally be acquired like toys or clothes; it is possible to find technological devices to contact entities or to record their presence (Scheitle, 2005: 237). On TV, it is possible to watch many paranormal shows similar to “Paranormal Witness”, and in cinema saga movies like “Resident Evil” or “Rec”. These shows represent a good indicator of how well this time is for supernatural themes in the industry. The huge popularity of this kind of media is mainly because they depict situations in which they embrace supernatural forces with scientific methods (Walter, 2013: 113). For many people viewing a researcher using a special recorder device to enquire a ghost is more convincing than watching a person proclaiming that he talks to dead people. This is the rationality of believing in science that impulses us to trust in maybe not so scientific facts. Under this logic, the paranormal phenomena are not only shows on TV but also true forces that can

be studied "scientifically". There is a special consideration that technological advances could allow us to study or to get information of what will follow in the next life.

Paranormal believes are well established in western societies. According to a survey achieved in 2003, more than one third of United States citizens thought that some paranormal experiences like psychic powers were real (Lindeman & Aarnio, 2006: 586). So when dealing with modern rational thinking and supernatural, we are attending a mixture of believes, where one person can be catholic but believe in UFOs or ghosts. So in many ways, people in modern or developed societies can gather different opinions, even opposites, but coordinated under some devotional core like "New Age" or Scientology for example. In a survey conducted in Queensland, Australia in 2008, people were asked if they credit some paranormal topics like psychic or spiritual healing or ghosts. The responses were very suggestive: 58.6 % of surveyed people said they believed that psychic powers can heal a body, and 35.9% that spirits of dead people can come back to visit some places or persons (Bridgstock, 2009: 04). This offers important evidence that no matter the educational level; there is always a place for paranormal phenomena acceptance in modern Western society. According to a research conducted in 2013 (Brewer, 2013: 325), people who see or read a story about paranormal activities where researchers use advanced technological devices and technical language are more reliable to belief in the evidences depicted in the stories. In this case, individuals are similarly rational as the Victorian ones. They choose to believe under certain social parameters belonging to a society that has established the scientific as a source of respectable reputation and veracity. The more scientific the supernatural research looks, the more people think about it as credible.

As it happened with Victorians, modern Western societies in XXI deal with a decline in Church power and influence, particularly in Europe, where there are many questionings on the role of ecclesiastical authority in moral matters. After The Enlightenment Age, Europe suffered a slow but definite change about beliefs. Science and scientists became more important for the public opinion, so this was how Europe entered "L'âge de la raison". In this state of declining religious beliefs, people searched for alternative philosophical and religious currents. In that case, Mesmerism was an option for those who wanted to believe in an alternative explanation but with doses of scientific basis (Darnton, 1968). Spiritism, as with Mesmerism, used rational methods for legitimized séances not only as show of carnivals and fairs but as a proper science. In XXI people have to duel with the same dilemma about religion, science, and the paranormal. In industrialized countries like England, individuals believe more in ghosts than even in God (Hanks, 2011: 01). So when the belief in religion is decreasing individuals look for unusual and heterodox flows to cover up the gap. This is how New Age, Spiritism, and Scientology nurture themselves with members that look for other options in the devotional "marketplace", even in regions where Catholicism has a strong diffusion like in Latin America (Torre & Gutiérrez, 2011).



## Ghostly digital media

The age of computers and social media settles well for the paranormal culture. Thanks to the information that flows along the virtual networks people can access to a myriad of data about paranormal sites, devices, techniques, etc. By now, it is possible to acquire one “spiritual board” in many different presentations and materials and, of course, you can play the virtual one. Ouija boards are flourishing and dynamic. It is possible to buy a board at toy stores in the same shelf of monopoly, and it is possible to play the Ouija online in several sites, and you can even buy one at the Apple store. There have been different kinds of Ouija games since the very beginning of personal computers, at mid-eighties, from “Lisa Game” an application in MS-DOS format to some online versions in Flash format. This time seems like a good one for talking boards; they are gaining popularity due to some Hollywood movies and TV shows.

In a certain way, paranormal explanation is an effort to comprise things that under other situations we are unable to understand or to give a proper and rational answer (Lindeman & Aarnio, 2006: 588). There is a causal logic, when people talk about contacting the “other side” with a technological device; it is a form of using scientific logic to assume a phenomenon that under other circumstances and arguments would be a case to a mental institution. It is trust worthier to argue that someone is using an electronic device to contact ghosts than to say that a ghost is murmuring into their ears. Using computers to play Ouija or to chat with dead people is another way of validating rationally a paranormal conduct. It is the same logic that mediums used during the Victorian age, investing scientific reasoning to a galore of events and beliefs that are out of the normal range of rationality, at least under the orthodox one.

When comparing the differences between using the Ouija board in Victorian age with playing a digital one on the Internet, it is possible to assert that one of the most important differences is the collective-individual dichotomy. In the past, séances were communal and the events required the entire dedication of all participants in the meeting: the use of touching, sight, hearing, and occasionally gustatory and olfactory senses (Willis, 2011: 204). On the contrary in the XXI century, substantial mass production of boards allows people to acquire one at a supermarket and to play alone or with friends, but with less ceremony. An individual can even play alone using a computer or a cell phone.

Ouija sessions in the past required acclimatizing a special chamber with a table, chairs, curtains, mirrors, and technological devices used as channels for contacting the paranormal force. By now, people can play the Ouija in a modest room with no special devices, unless they are conducting an investigation, in that case they have available computers and other sophisticated artifacts to measure and record the event. Another interesting difference between séances in the past and now is the fact that moderns enjoy a more democratized access to the paranormal research. People can approach to

information and material about the subject easier than in the past, practically everybody can be a paranormal investigator or practice the Ouija board. During Victorian age, attending a public séance was possible, but practicing Spiritism was expensive not only because the prices of the books, or the expensive nature of the devices, but consulting a famous medium was pricey and only upper class could afford it. Digital Oujias can be used even on iPads or you can play in cybercafés if you do not have a computer. It is certainly less ceremonial but more accessible.

It has always been a tendency to record paranormal activity as a proof of life beyond death and for moral lesson purposes as well. Famous is Pliny the Younger's story about the sorrow of a ghost, who was a slave, that appeared to the philosopher Athenodorus, who at the end of the story, relieves the poor soul from his torture. During the XIX the development of several media inventions like photography, cinema, and phonography have improved the quality and facility for capturing paranormal events. In modern days, the Internet has allowed not only the intercommunication between people, but also, the sharing of huge amounts of information. With the use of social media, like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube the paranormal, no matter if it refers to UFOs or ghosts has become a massive phenomenon. With information technology it is possible to share a picture or a video almost instantly and almost free of charge as well. Mobile devices allow not only to be a spectator but also to transform you into a paranormal researcher. Modern technology has blurred the line between an observer and a participant, and for that reason the amount of "evidence" is frequently increasing every second. But even ghosts and similar paranormal phenomenon can mutate into different things and change its signification in the Age of Information. One ghostly photo can be converted into a "digital meme" and travel along the net changing in form and sometimes in meaning. Internet, as mass technology, could create its own urban legends, known as "creepy past". These kinds of urban legends travel from one social platform to another; and even change their digital format in the process: from photo to video, from video to alphabet characters, and then to audio. Urban legends sometimes pass from one user to another unchanged but occasionally someone adds something new: eventually the ghost, for example, could be a woman or a child or can appear in Mexico or in France.

Maybe, one of the most famous urban legends from the Internet was born from an online video game. "Slender Man" was first depicted in the video game "Slender: The Eight Pages". But this personage has evolved and replicates himself into an urban legend, which travels in varied forms in cyberspace. But even one day on May 21, 2014, "Slender Man" became real, when two teenagers stabbed her collage mate 19 times and almost killed her because they wanted to please "Slender Man". According to the police, one girl declared that she had the hope "that the victim would die and they would see Slender and know that he exists." (Jones, 2014) This sad case shows not only the way that media can manipulate people, but, no matter how small and homogeny a community

could be, the belief in the paranormal phenomena evidences the varied and radical rationalities that can cohabit side by side even in rural small towns (Ginzburg, 2009).

## Conclusion

It is always tempting to label subsequent history periods like totally and clearly isolated one from another; but doing this is certainly a difficult task or even an impossible one. When an epoch ends, and another replaces it, many of the "old stuff" survives and remains, maybe with some changes, but enduring in essence. This is the case when we talk about Victorian and Modern ages. In a certain matter, we are still being Victorians, especially when we think about the place that science takes up in our daily lives, but at the same time we, like them, still believe in paranormal events, this is certainly an additional characteristic we share with each other. Victorians, like people living in modern Western society, were very optimistic about science and technology. People assumed that there was almost nothing unable to achieve, even reaching the beloved dead ones.

Actually, we are living in a society that, in certain manner, worships information and technology. There is a huge optimism about the great potentialities that we could achieve as a specie with the help of technology, especially with the support of computers and virtual networks (Roszak, 1994). Information became more than just fancy data collected on magazines and encyclopedias, by now most of many actions in our daily life are determined by the quality of the information we could get, when we are dealing with natural disasters and criminality the accuracy of data is a very important asset in our daily life. Today there is a great trust in information technology and mobile devices, we are living in a time where computers can improve quality of life in ways that Victorians could only imagine, but at the same time we share with them the trust in science and rational thought. So if technology can connect people from high distances even from the moon to the earth, can technology help people to talk to their beloved lost ones? This question is still valid, at least in the minds of paranormal believers across time.

In a certain way, Victorians and Modern's unorthodox alternative beliefs share the same goal: to create a plausible justification out of Catholic religion, about life in this world and in the "other". This is one of the reasons that beliefs in contacting supernatural entities continue existing in our so-called "modern Western society". Rationality is not related with the truth or falseness of data, but with an intrinsic logic that connects evidences and explanations. Paranormal investigators from Victorian age developed a specific inner logic that has quietly remained with us across time.

When trying to rationalize paranormal phenomenon, science continues being a good ally. This is not because paranormal activity is irrational and banned from our intellectual understanding but on the contrary, we certainly have encompassed those events under a rational scope that allows us to

give them a reasonable order under our inner modern logic. This is not related with the veracity of the paranormal, but with giving it a place and to embrace it into our daily lives.

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