

# Spiritist social media

## Seeing-practices, participation, and alternative realities

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The music stopped in the middle of a ringing chord, soundless silence and breathless suspense prevailed. Slowly I rose and fixed my gaze on the faint motion of the curtain. The curtains were halfway drawn and a young female face, as well as the upper part of the body, revealed itself, curiously viewing us. The phenomenon shimmered half-transparent in the brightest blue-white colour and it seemed to have a thin veil falling from a small diadem. One second and the curtains fell again. Everyone started breathing having held their breath and the wait began anew.<sup>1</sup>

This eyewitness report came from a seance in 1901, arranged by the spiritist Mary Karadja with Frau Abend, a German medium in Blasieholmen, a wealthy district of Stockholm. It is almost possible to feel the suspense in the dark, silent room, with the seance participants holding their breath, and the writer becoming so exhaled that it was impossible to remain seated. Then, suddenly, a spirit materialized, emerging from the 'cabinet' (a wooden construction in which the medium sat), peeking inquisitively through the curtains, gleaming with an otherworldly shimmer. Moved by the experience, the eyewitness published an account in a newspaper, so that readers

interested in an ‘impartial description’ by a ‘non-spiritist’ could glimpse the workings of a seance.<sup>2</sup>

Seances of this kind were part of an international, cultural movement called modern spiritism.<sup>3</sup> Unlike earlier forms of spirit sightings, modern spiritism arose in the nineteenth century and held to the idea it was possible to communicate with the dead through different mediums, ranging from human mediums talking in trance or channelling materialized spirits, to apparatuses such as the psychograph, with which to receive written spirit messages.<sup>4</sup> While paranormal topics were not seen as worthy of study, in the last thirty years a growing body of research about spiritism has shed light on its impact on the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture, religion, art, politics, and everyday life, and its entwinement with media technology.<sup>5</sup> Some of these cultural impacts, moreover, linger on into our own time, for example in the form of online spirit communication or the depictions of spirits in popular culture.<sup>6</sup>

Spirit communication was media dense. It was through various different media that the spiritists came into contact with spirits, and it was in a mediated form, such as spirit photography, that they kept a material record of what occurred. On the other hand, it was often through the medium of books, newspaper articles, periodicals, or spiritist lectures that people became interested in spiritism and started seeing the world differently. All of this makes spiritism interesting from a media history perspective, but it is also possible to contribute to the discussion about whether social or participatory media are older than is often recognized. Participatory media are often seen as radically new and a thing of our millennium. However, when not merely reduced to twentieth-century mass media, it is possible to see how historic audiences, too, were ‘activated’.<sup>7</sup>

As I argue in this chapter, however, the spiritist media went beyond the participatory to conjure up an alternative spirit reality, in the sense that the spiritists lived in and through their media. As media can change how and what we perceive as our reality, helping

structure everyday life and construct our social world, so different types of media also advance different types of socialities.<sup>8</sup> In our world we use smartphones so that people on the other side of the world can follow our everyday lives. That places us in a social realm entirely different to the one the spiritists inhabited.

As a consequence, media are not mere apparatuses with which to send information or be entertained by, but impact our infrastructure and the environments we live in. In investigating the spiritists' alternative realities, this essay draws on John Durham Peters' ideas of how communication shapes human reality, how media can serve as infrastructures for people to handle their realities, and how media are used to connect people.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, in *Speaking into the air* Peters argues that nineteenth-century spiritism was one of the more important events in which the 'cultural and metaphysical implications of new forms of communication were worked out' and which became the origin for a lot of our contemporary vocabulary regarding communication.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, what Peters describes as 'the spiritualist view on communication' represents the age-old dream of communicating without obstacles or misunderstandings, regardless of distance, physical presence, or even death. However, as with all communication, there is a need for something in between—a medium—and so it will never be perfect. Spiritism takes this to extremes with its wish for limitless communication from one spirit to another, while at the same time various media are necessary to make the communication happen.<sup>11</sup> The spiritists' ideas of communication and media use thus shaped their reality—and their perception of it.

Any country where the spiritist movement was found in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could serve as a case study for the investigation of spiritist media use, but the focus here is Sweden, as there has not been much research on Swedish spiritism generally and even less on its media.<sup>12</sup> Yet, Swedish spiritists were connected with the bigger movement internationally. They consumed foreign literature and spirit photography, they produced texts which

then circulated in other countries, and they maintained personal, international relations.<sup>13</sup> A Swedish case study can thus contribute to our understanding of the wider context of spiritism's cultural and medial impact.<sup>14</sup> The empirical material itself is a mix of newspapers, spiritist periodicals, booklets and books, letters, and the unpublished records of Edelweissförbundet, a Swedish spiritist society.

This essay thus investigates, first, the seeing practices and media protocols of Swedish spiritist media; second, the seance as a participatory, social medium; and, third, the ways spiritists' media impacted their daily lives.

### Spiritism and its followers

At first glance, the modern spiritist movement can seem the anti-thesis of the modern world of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It may appear strange that at a time when scientific and technological advances promised a mastering of the world, and (institutional) religion lost its position as the main authority of explanation, supernatural belief should have been so widespread and popular. However, modernism, surrealism, and new forms of Western esoterism, including spiritism, all mirrored an uncertainty about what reality was and whether people could rely on their own senses to perceive it. The new media technologies, such as photography (invented in the 1830s) and wireless telegraphy (invented in the 1890s), helped change how time and space were experienced.<sup>15</sup> A belief in spirit communication accordingly led spiritists to invent media such as psychographs, while photography and wireless communication were adopted or adapted to reach the invisible spirit realm.<sup>16</sup> Further, as different media had made worlds visible which had been there all the time without people knowing, it was thought feasible that an until then invisible spirit realm could exist, be made visible, and communicated with.<sup>17</sup>

The starting point for ‘modern spiritism’ is usually dated to 1846, when the Fox family in Hydesville in the US started to communicate with a spirit in their home by systematic knockings.<sup>18</sup> This ur-event was followed by many more of a similar character, all of which gained so much attention that modern spiritism turned into a movement, which spread from the US to Australia, the UK, France, Germany, Scandinavia, and elsewhere, gathering millions of followers.<sup>19</sup> In Sweden spiritism did not take hold as much, but it certainly existed and grew, as both the Swedish spiritist periodical *Efteråt?* (‘Afterwards?’) and anti-spiritist Axel Herrlin agreed.<sup>20</sup> While public seances were common in other countries, in Sweden most spiritists worked silently within their ‘family or smaller circle of friends.’<sup>21</sup> Such a mindset also ensured a strict selection of who could attend private seances. Karadja, for example, who was known as ‘one of the leading spiritists’ in Sweden, explained that many of her dearest friends had ‘pleaded in vain’ to be admitted to her seances.<sup>22</sup> Edelweissförbundet chose its members carefully.<sup>23</sup> Yet, even if the public could not freely attend seances they still knew of their existence, as many written accounts were accessible. In spiritist books and periodicals (both Swedish and non-Swedish) there were plenty of seance accounts and report extracts and spirit photographs.

### Learning to see spirits

There is a considerable imaginary component to our world. This is not to say we live in an illusion, but rather that people are willing to share imaginings, which in turn become our material everyday realities. Communities’ shared imaginings are of a visual nature as actual pictures and as images conjured up by words.<sup>24</sup> What people in the past expected of spiritism and its imagery was thus initially established by spiritist texts, whether in specialized periodicals, literature, or newspapers. Spiritist periodicals saw it as their mission to help lead the eye and the mind of the reader towards familiarity

with spirits and eventually being able to see then: ‘Therefore, it shall be our unchanging task to direct our reader’s attention to a transcendental, spiritual world and his own transcendental entity, and with appropriate articles to orient him in the spiritual world.’<sup>25</sup>

A written description in *Efteråt?* of producing a spirit photograph, in this case with one Sir Wallace as a sitter on the 17 May 1874, could read like this:

Since I had sat down for the third time and the prepared plate had been put in place in the camera I asked the figure that it should come close to me. The third plate showed a womanly figure, who stood just *in front* of me, so that her dress covered the lower parts of my body. ... as soon as I received the copies, I saw immediately that the third plate showed, without doubt, a portrait of my mother—resembling her both in facial features and expression.<sup>26</sup>

Such descriptions could give readers an idea of what to expect from spirit photography, but this particular article also noted that the picture could be found in Miss Houghton’s book about spirit photography, which contained several similar pictures like that shown here (Fig. 2.1).<sup>27</sup> Not all spirit photographs featured such a high degree of verisimilitude, however. A spirit photograph in the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* from 1921 (Fig. 2.2) was said to show ‘one bigger and several smaller faces’.<sup>28</sup> If not told what to look for it would have been easy to miss the faces: the spirit photograph was as much conjured up by the voice of the article as by the picture itself, suggesting a certain way of looking was necessary in order to detect spirits. While an extreme example, even clearer spirit photographs such as the one from Miss Houghton’s book were pointedly criticized by newspapers, with spirit photography dismissed as ‘veiled pictures, with halfway wiped-out facial features, in which one ... may recognize anyone’.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 2.1. 'Picture 49, Wallace's mother' (Houghton 1882, 225).



Figure 2.2. 'A Swedish physician's observations on spiritists in Belfast and Crew', *Dagens Nyheter* (13 Feb. 1921), 3. © AB Dagens Nyheter.

Texts describing spirits were thus essential as they led the reader's eye and told them what to see. As Magnus Bremmer points out, when photography was new, the observer was thought to need (textual) cues because of the supposed information overload. A text is thus never an innocent description, but part of what moulds and establishes social practices.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, readers of spiritist content could be taught how to look for spirits and what they were supposed to look for when they came across them as pictures or 'real' spirits in a seance.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was an accepted procedure to direct the observer's eye. As Tony Bennett shows, the museum visitor's gaze, for example, was directed to encourage the individual to be aware of their civic role, thereby creating seeing practices such as 'civic seeing'.<sup>31</sup> Anna-Maria Hällgren expands on this idea in her description of a media environment in which the process of 'learning to see' took place, to late nineteenth century's popular culture exhibitions, and shows how its visual pedagogy attempted to make observers better citizens by placing them in the correct 'seeing position' and directing their gaze.<sup>32</sup> The spiritists' intention may not have been to produce 'better citizens', but there was definitely a sense in which they would use spiritism to 'improve general morals'.<sup>33</sup> However, no matter the intention of museum curators or writers of spiritist articles, observers could not be forced to see in a particular way; they had to want to see that way, too.<sup>34</sup>

If open to the possibility of seeing spirits, spirit-seeing practices could also be used to perceive spirits with one's own eyes, as in this report by a 'schoolteacher'.

Immediately I felt anew that I was not alone. To my right side there was the same figure whom I had descried in the mist. ... Now I saw a face ... clear, distinguished, just as one sees in daylight ... It was

*him*—my dead friend ... Slowly the figure became clearer ... I saw his left hand with the ring.<sup>35</sup>

For the schoolteacher this was a real event, while for the readers of *Efteråt?*, which published the report, it was once again a textual experience, adding the practice of learning how to see spirits. Nevertheless, without an external medium such as a photographic plate (the schoolteacher here being the medium herself) there was room for doubt, as the teacher confessed: 'I sat myself down in the rocking chair and reflected on what I had experienced. Was all this only imagination, excited fantasy, scare—or what? The whole thing had been so animated, though, so tangible, so real.'<sup>36</sup> A way of ensuring the sight was not a hallucination was thus to use an external medium or, alternatively, for there to be several people to witness the same event—such as a community at a seance.

At a seance there would typically be an 'audience' gathered around a medium who would tune into the spirit world and through whom the spirits would speak, draw, or even materialize. At one such seance, Karadja described how she and the other participants had seen how a spirit 'as fast as lightning rose to the ceiling and then, in plain sight ... sank down through the massive table'.<sup>37</sup> Karadja and the others identified this spirit as John King, a spirit who was described in the book by 'M. A. Oxon', *Spirit teachings*. According to Karadja, 'thousands' of people in England had seen this particular spirit, and he had also been photographed and painted. This once more shows how (international) descriptions, readings, and pictures helped form a mental picture of what to expect of a seance. After all, how likely were the participants to identify something that moved 'as quick as lightning'?

Whatever the medium showed (be that a text, a picture, or a materialization through a human medium) was never an objective truth, but rather a truth based on the group's previous knowledge and (taught) seeing practices. When media are new, there is no established

way of how they ought to be used. However, as Lisa Gitelman states, the ways we use media become self-evident because of social processes and practices. These normative rules or protocols for media use may either be imposed top-down or arise from below. Either way, each medium and its audience evolve together, defining its use socially.<sup>38</sup> As with any new medium, spirit photography and spirit sightings not only created seeing practices of what to expect and how to see a spirit, but they also created a need for the participants to learn what to do with the medium and how to operate it.

### The seance as participatory media

If a medium equals technology plus protocols, all media can be called 'social media', in the sense that they enable interactions between people by the use of some form of communication technology.<sup>39</sup> Social or participatory media are often seen as radically new, the offspring of Web 2.0, turning audiences into active participants who create, distribute, and share media content at a scope and speed never seen before, but as Anders Ekström points out, participatory media are not really new and there has never been such a thing as a 'passive audience'.<sup>40</sup> Throughout history there have been numerous media which elicit audience participation, such as museums or exhibitions.<sup>41</sup> Naturally, though, different types of media and social settings address different audiences and the ways they participate.<sup>42</sup> Seances should, accordingly, not only be seen as a new medium, with new seeing practices and protocols for their use, but also as a new social medium.

Two seances, described in Karadja's booklet *Abend-affärens dokument*, are particularly well suited for an analysis of how groups of people saw spirits together, while at the same time being an example of a social medium. Karadja (1868–1943) was born into a wealthy Stockholm family, but moved to The Hague in 1886 when she married the much older Turkish diplomat, Prince Jean Karadja. After



Figure 2.3. 'Princess Mary Karadja, née Smith', *Idun* 47 (20 Nov. 1896).

the death of her husband in 1891, Karadja encountered spiritism in London and discovered she herself was a medium, able to receive spirit messages.<sup>43</sup> On her return to Sweden, Karadja worked tirelessly to spread spiritism.<sup>44</sup> She opened up her home in Blasieholmstorg for seances and invited international mediums, including Frau Abend.<sup>45</sup> Karadja also was literarily active.<sup>46</sup> One of her publications, the *Abend-affärens dokument* booklet, was written to help her friend Frau Abend shake off accusations of fraud.<sup>47</sup> However, what was interesting was not the contents of the booklet per se, but the way it was written: as an assemblage of eyewitness reports of the same two seances. Directly after a seance, each participant was asked to write an individual report before being allowed to 'share their experiences' with one another.<sup>48</sup> According to Karadja most had never witnessed the materialization of a spirit before.<sup>49</sup> Yet, even so they had expectations about what they might see.

I [Miss Jabea von Braun] had never before seen a materialization and was surprised by the face's completely natural colour and looks ... Even if the apparitions were different in height, the figures, however, were of the same strange, slender form which can be found in Princess Karadja's various automatic drawings.<sup>50</sup>

Miss Jabea von Braun had thus encountered spirit depictions before: Karadja's automatic drawings (Fig. 2.4), which Karadja had done when in trance, with a spirit guiding her hand. Braun used these drawings to describe what she had seen, revealing how they affected her expectations of what to look for.

When comparing seance reports, it is apparent the participants generally agreed there was a female, white-clad figure. However, there were discrepancies in the time they waited and the spirit's height and facial features. Mr Algot Ruhe, for example, noted the following:

AUTOMATISK RITNING tecknad 3 Dec. 99.  
Medium: *Mary Karadja.*



Föreställer »öfvergången till andelif» — d. v. s. sjä-  
lens tillstånd omedelbart efter frigörelsen från kroppen,  
innan den ännu vaknat till medvetande.

Den nyfödda anden synes insvept i en äggformad  
hvlsa af fluider och har ännu ej slitit de trådar, som  
ouspiinna den och binda den vid jorden.

Figure 2.4. Automatic drawing by Mary Karadja (Karadja 1900b, 2).

After about half an hour the curtains opened and a white figure became visible. The face was completely dark (?!?). The height = medium. [Footnote by Karadja] This declaration was contested most vehemently by the other participants. From his seat, the furthest away in the room, Dr Ruhe could not see as clearly as most of the other guests.<sup>51</sup>

Mrs Ida Svartling:

After about 20 minutes the curtains were opened and a white-clad female figure showed itself. She seemed to me somewhat taller than the medium ... After some time, a third shape became visible to me, that too white. I saw this one from the side. [Footnote by Mary Karadja] This observation is of great interest! Depending on which seat the spectators had, they did see the figures either *en face* or in profile, which shows that the figures had objective reality and are not hallucinations.<sup>52</sup>

Miss Jabea von Braun:

As the curtains in the next moment fell back into place the little figure behind could only be described as something vaguely white, but a white of strange sparkling purity, only comparable to a frost in moonlight. [Footnote by Mary Karadja] Especially striking description.<sup>53</sup>

No wonder there were discrepancies, as every human being apprehends the world somewhat differently, while at the same time making sense of what they perceive according to their sociocultural context.<sup>54</sup> On the individual sensory level, the framework of spiritism provided a (new) way for the brain to interpret physical signals such as flashes of light in a darkened seance room as materialized spirits. The community level was what assured them their own interpretation

was not an illusion. As Charles Peirce states, it strengthens a belief's trustworthiness to be part of a community who all believe the same thing, and the bigger the community the more universal the belief seems.<sup>55</sup> A group of people who share the same set of beliefs can together create mutual norms and values which result in their own 'symbolic universe'.<sup>56</sup> Thus what people expect to see and how they see it are determined by seeing practices and cultural consensus. Visual practices change over time, because seeing is a culturally and historically specific process.<sup>57</sup> When a group shares a seeing experience, their expectations and values are already in place.<sup>58</sup> Braun was familiar with Karadja's pictorial language and thus with spiritist seeing practices already before she attended her first seance.

As Simone Natale points out, the circulating media on spiritism not only added to spiritism's visibility, but also helped shape a sense of community among spiritists.<sup>59</sup> Without setting foot in a seance or joining a spiritist society, people could feel part of the community and be acquainted with its seeing practices and media protocols. The Abend seances attracted an audience of believing spiritists or people who were at least familiar with the spiritist framework, as they were 'friendly minded sceptics'.<sup>60</sup> Meeting people with different mindsets can disrupt belief, according to Peirce, while people in a homogenous group tend to cling to the belief they have already espoused, as doubt is an unpleasant state of mind.<sup>61</sup> The people attending seances had much the same mindset, as real non-believers were excluded with the argument that they would disrupt the circle and make it impossible to see spirits.<sup>62</sup> Without that disruption, spiritist communities were confirmed in their own seeing practices and beliefs.

The social dynamic at seances made them a participatory, social medium. Participating in an event, as Ekström suggests, means connecting and communicating with other participants before, during, and after the actual media experience—seeing others and being seen.<sup>63</sup> Everyone at a seance was aware of the others, and saw and heard one another's reactions. For example, one Lillie Ahlgren

described how Karadja interacted with the medium, handing her a pair of scissors so the medium could cut a lock of hair from Karadja's dead child in the spirit sphere and hand it to Karadja. This made Ahlgren sad, as she had hoped for a greeting from her own dead child.<sup>64</sup> While the content, such as the greeting from a dead child, was important (if nothing else it 'confirmed' to believers there was a spirit realm), Karadja's participation by handing scissors to the medium and receiving a lock of hair, as well as everyone witnessing it happening, was equally essential for the seance to work.

While in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries different media were often the central attraction, the audience was oftentimes invited to join in the media production.<sup>65</sup> The (human) medium was the main attraction at a seance, channelling spirits and making them visible by materializing them; however, without the active participation of the others, seated around the medium like an audience, not much would have happened. The participants' reactions and interactions with the spirits—a kind of performance in its own right—constituted the content. The participants were expected to be alert and active, so depending on who was present the content would change. It was they who identified the spirits and interpreted what was happening collectively, turning individual responses into a shared experience with a narrative, and they too who determined how the seance ought to work as a medium. Gitelman's protocols can be seen in the making here, as the social 'rules' of seances were tried out and refined, first through the participants' actions and reactions at the seance and later in a more durable written form.

After an experience, as Antoon Geels and Owe Wikström write, there is a need to make sense of it. The experiencer's context and beliefs become the frame with which they explain a spiritual experience.<sup>66</sup> The participants of the Abend seances were asked to write down their individual experiences while still seated in the seance room, having just seen spirits, or at least witnessed others seeing or hearing them, still fresh in their minds. They then reflected on the

discrepancies between their accounts together and determined what had occurred. This fixation was further reinforced when Karadja compiled the reports, adding footnotes and comments such as ‘Especially striking description’ or ‘Baroness F ... was mistaken about the time. The vision lasted merely 6 to 8 seconds.’<sup>67</sup> Karadja played some things up and others down, constructing a ‘true’, final version of the event. Ultimately, it was not what they saw during the seance, but what they agreed on and Karadja finalized which became the ‘truth’, and part of the ongoing construction of the media protocols surrounding the use of the social medium seance.

The experience was not limited to the seance room, though. As Ekström’s research has shown, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries accounts of media—for example in newspapers—were part of their attraction. Those who had not attended in person could experience an event, while those who had been present could read about themselves as part of a performing audience. At the same time, the person writing about an event could claim a kind of celebrity.<sup>68</sup> In the case of the Abend seances, no Swedish newspaper wanted to publish Karadja’s assertions of Frau Abend’s innocence.<sup>69</sup> Karadja nonetheless managed to publish a booklet about the seances, raising her public profile.<sup>70</sup> The original participants had another chance to rethink what they saw, now with a bit of distance, because Karadja sent them the proofs.<sup>71</sup> Thus although Karadja was the author, the booklet became another instance of media participation, resulting in a co-written text.

After publication, the participants could read about themselves in a public medium, which also meant the original participants were now not only visible to one another, but also to anyone who might read the booklet. The newspapers now became interested and started writing about the seance, albeit in a negative way, accusing Abend of fraud and Karadja of credulity for supporting her.<sup>72</sup> The ‘truth’ of seeing spirits was now shared beyond the spiritist community in the public sphere, with a newspaper debate about what had actually

been seen at the seances. Real spirits or trickery? The participatory aspects of the seance expanded to include newspaper reporters and readers, who could discuss the matter among themselves. Regardless of whether one believed in spirit sightings or not, the seance descriptions and public discussions further cemented the protocols for how the seance worked. Closing the circle, such seance protocols and seeing practices could in turn tell people what to expect if they found themselves at a seance for the first time.

### Alternative realities

What people believe about human existence and the meaning of life is impacted by current media, just as media are influenced by what people believe.<sup>73</sup> The spiritists could only live and move in their alternative spirit reality by the use of media, while, at the same time, it was through various media channels that they received greetings and reassurances from deceased loved ones, obtained missions, got insight into a ‘bigger truth’ and from that ascribed meaning to life. In other words, the spiritist’s spirit realm existed with, in, and through media.

At the Abend seances, a mother stricken with grief at having lost a child would have found the presence of said child comforting, as it would have assured her of life after death in a spirit sphere. The woman who was saddened when Karadja was given material evidence, a lock of hair, that her child was on the other side heard her own dead daughter later in the seance, when the medium in a ‘sleeping state [sang] a song with [a] child’s magnificent, clear and bright voice.’<sup>74</sup> This can be compared to how a medium such as a telephone call can create a feeling of presence, as Peters describes it—not focusing on the content but becoming a place where life is lived.<sup>75</sup> Each individual spirit message was important to its recipient and indeed all the other participants present, yet the fact that a spirit message was communicated at all would have been experienced as

confirmation of the existence of the spirit realm. When Ahlgren heard her child sing, that put her in the presence of the child. Rather than lingering in memory, it allowed the mother to share a new moment with her child, reassuring her the child was well in the spirit realm, and holding out the possibility of further communication with the help of spiritist media. Consequently, the media changed her perception of reality and created an alternative reality of possible contact with the dead. For some people, spirit sightings went beyond the occasional seance to profoundly affect their daily lives.

Huldine Fock, for example, probably attended the Abend seances as the 'Baroness H. F.' of the booklet.<sup>76</sup> Fock (1859–1931) had grown up in Ireland, but followed her mother, Huldine Beamish, back to Sweden.<sup>77</sup> Beamish was a trance medium and became a major figure in Edelweissförbundet, founded in 1890.<sup>78</sup> While Fock started out as a sceptic, her attitude towards spiritism changed and shortly before her mother's death on 11 December 1892, she not only became a member of Edelweissförbundet, but even agreed to replace her mother as its leader.<sup>79</sup> Edelweissförbundet consisted of a select group of people who received spirit messages (mostly with the help of a psychograph), spirit drawings, visions, and missions.<sup>80</sup> Its members used the various forms of media together to conjure up images of what their spirits and the spirit realm looked like. While they, too, were influenced by texts and images circulating in the wider spiritist community, they also fashioned their own symbolic universe from their spirit communications, taking as their symbol the edelweiss flower.<sup>81</sup> This, for example, is what one member, Mathilde Nilsson, saw in trance on 16 March 1893:

Now I see the figure—it is so mighty—it is the shining Edelweiss, which is placed upon the head—He is so manly—the whole figure—he is standing right in front of the table.<sup>82</sup>



Figure 2.5. Huldine Fock. Photograph Riksarkivet, Eric von Rosens arkiv, Familjefotografier 1880-tal–1950-tal 5AA:6 (26 Dec. 1892). © Mathias Fock.

The social realm being largely constructed of shared imaginings made into material realities, the universe the Edelweissförbundet members conjured up for themselves inevitably had an impact on their daily lives, whether because of their regular spirit communications, the time and effort they invested in the society, or the ‘missions’ which the spirits gave them, whether to help other people or lost spirits (for example by prayer).<sup>83</sup> In this case media most definitely became more than mere entertainment or information channels. Media, as Peters argues, connects us to others, anchors us in our reality, helps us navigate, but also partakes in the creation of our world.<sup>84</sup> As a medium, a person could even ‘be’ in that other reality, moving in it in visions, as when Nilsson saw the ‘manly figure’ with the edelweiss flower standing at the table.

The alternative reality which Edelweissförbundet offered could interfere with its members’ lives as mothers and wives in the ‘normal world’. In normal life, Fock had married Carl Alexander Fock in 1880 and together they had five daughters. Although originally from a wealthy background, as Rodin’s research has shown, the family lived a life of luxury far beyond their means, because both Fock’s brother and her husband had lost a great deal of money.<sup>85</sup> That there was a tension due to the mixing of everyday and spiritist duties, becomes evident in Fock’s letters to Nilsson. Fock herself admitted there was ‘terribly much to do each day’.<sup>86</sup> As a wife and mother she was in charge of the smooth running of their household, including being a hostess, but this made it hard for Fock to find time for her spiritual practices.<sup>87</sup> The ‘Edelweiss Home’ became an important site—the space where Edelweissförbundet members met and which offered them, in the words of a spirit, a ‘sanctuary, free from all earthly worries and bondage’.<sup>88</sup> Fock did not enjoy her family holidays, which took her away to fashionable Drottningholm or Gripsholm from June to late August, but made it impossible for her to go to the Edelweiss Home or join in most of the society’s activities:<sup>89</sup>

Yesterday was a painful day—interrupted in my prayer time, my reading, my thoughts—finally I became so wretched that I could only cry ... Such longing for you & the Edelweiss Home.<sup>90</sup>

In the end Fock felt inadequate to the task, split between her earthly and spiritual realities. In her own words, she felt it was her ‘fault ... weakness and ... insufficient ability to free herself from the earthly obligations in ... [her] own home, which after all also must be taken care of’, but because of which the plans to build an Edelweiss Chapel were delayed.<sup>91</sup> In her will, Fock took the society’s members to task for being ‘deeply interested’ in their spirit mission but taking their duties too lightly in their daily lives.<sup>92</sup>

Spiritist media helped communities fashion alternative realities. For certain groups, such as Edelweissförbundet, they shaped the experiences of reality, life, and death and how they lived their daily lives. However, what really turned this alternative reality into a tangible truth (for the spiritists) was the media they used. The spiritists encountered the souls of the dead through a diverse assortment of media, and it was in the form of media they kept a material record of their experiences (for example, seance reports or spirit photography). It was also usually media—newspaper articles or spiritist literature and lectures—which first sparked people’s interest in spiritism and which could become the starting point for seeing reality in a different way.

### Co-producing an alternative reality

Come and see, spiritism indeed exclaims, but come with the right eyes.<sup>93</sup>

I have described three distinct yet interconnected processes. First, people could learn from media texts how to see spirits and interpret spirit sightings, which resulted in seeing practices and protocols for

how to use spiritist media. For readers with no personal experience, such texts raised expectations for how to ‘use’ the various spiritist media and what they might see; for readers with direct experience it confirmed their experiences—and sightings—and drew them into a spiritist community with shared seeing practices. A belief in spiritism, or at least a positive curiosity, would also have been necessary. The seeing practices and protocols for spiritist media usage would have helped the willing see spirits in blurry photographs or dark seance rooms. And if such sightings were experienced together with others of the same mind, it could reinforce the experience to make it even more fixed and ‘true’.

Second, seances were late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century participatory media, and another example of an ever-growing list of social media that are far older than is often recognized today. The seance as a media technology, in combination with spirit seeing practices and spirit media protocols, made it a social medium. Its participatory potential was twofold: at a seance, a human medium co-produced the content with the participants by dint of their reactions and interactions with the human medium, the spirits, and one another; and the co-produced content could spread beyond the seance room to be discussed in the public sphere. Eyewitness reports of seances further cemented the seeing practices and spiritist media protocols.

Third, spiritist media not only operated participatively, but also could conjure up an alternative spiritist reality, in the sense that the spiritists lived in and through spiritist media. Consequently, their shared imaginings became part of material reality. Members of Edelweissförbundet, for example, immersed themselves in the spirit realm to such a degree that it interfered with their ‘real world’ lives and impacted on their well-being.

Audiences who interacted with the new spiritist media formed practices of how to see a spirit and what to expect of a seance as well as established protocols of how to use spiritist media, a process which

was also deeply participatory. While some writers of spiritist articles may have functioned as ‘instructors’, suggesting how to use a medium and what to see, any person partaking in a seance or having spiritual experiences could get these, their own descriptions, published, whether an enthusiastic non-spiritist writing to *Jämtlandsposten*, the ‘schoolteacher’ in *Efteråt?*, or the participants at the Abend seances in Karadja’s booklet. When such personal experiences entered the public sphere, they helped normalize what a seance should be and how it ought to work, further defining the spiritist media protocols. At the same time, personal experience also invited further discussion, and some of the responses moved beyond the spiritist media universe by for instance entering a newspaper debate. Even non-believers would have been able to recognize a seance and would theoretically have known how it was supposed to proceed.

As the content of the seance was co-produced by the human medium and the participants, it was not only participatory, it would not have worked at all without an active, engaged audience, who interpreted what the medium produced. The content generated at a seance was thus heavily dependent on who was present. Neither was the exact content as important as the fact that the participants experienced communication. The possibility of reconnecting with the dead created both a new co-presence and an alternative reality. The spiritist media were the ports to this other reality, opening up to communication, interaction, and togetherness. A human medium would even have had the possibility to ‘move’ within this alternative reality by means of visions. Different media first created this alternative reality and then provided the means to enter, experience, and live within it. Neither was it ephemeral: this other realm left its mark on the material lives of those involved, setting them apart. The spiritist media not only created new presences and new lines of communication with people thought lost, and promised future immortality in a spirit world, but also conjured up an alternative reality that could only exist in and through the spiritist media.

While the history of spirit communication might at a first glance seem like a curiosity from the past, we might well want to bear the processes involved in mind when looking at and interacting with our own media. How people perceive their world has always been heavily dependent on media, and (social) media change our perceptions of reality and our interactions with it. What practices, protocols, and alternative realities are we creating? What are they doing to our perceptions of the world and our material everyday lives? If we come to it with the right eyes, we might well see different realities.

## Notes

- 1 Ci Vol 1901.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 The movement was called both ‘modern spiritism’ and ‘modern spiritualism’, but for reasons of clarity I will refer to it here as ‘spiritism’.
- 4 A psychograph was an apparatus not unsimilar to a ouija board, which when touched would spell out spirit messages; see, for example, dr. re., ‘Psykografen’, *Efteråt?* 214 (1909).
- 5 For spiritism, see Warner 2006; Willburn & Kontou 2012; Bogdan & Hammer 2016. For spiritism in relation to media and communication, see Sconce 2000; Natale 2011.
- 6 Google a combination of spirit, communication, and online and there are currently some 100 million hits from ‘Spirit Communication Online Course’, and ‘Surfing the Spirit Web with Internet Ouija’ to ‘A medium reveals how to communicate with spirits’, while in popular culture it ranges from Netflix’s *Haunting of Hill House* (2018) to paranormal reality series such as *Most Haunted* (2002–2010).
- 7 Ekström et al. 2010, 4.
- 8 Mitchell & Hansen 2010, xiv; Couldry & Hepp 2017, 27, 32–3.
- 9 Peters 2000, 5; Peters 2015, 14, 21, 47.
- 10 Peters 2000, 100.
- 11 Ibid. 65, 101, 142, 178.
- 12 Carleson & Levander 2016 and Faxneld 2020 have general overviews of Swedish spiritism. Inga Sanner 1995, 2009 has looked at Swedish spiritist thinking and how spiritism, science, and religion have explained the unconscious.
- 13 For the Swedish audience for foreign literature and spirit photography, see Sandal 2020. For international exchanges, see, for example, some of Mary Karadja’s books which were published in German and English, such as *Towards the light: A mystic poem* (Karadja 1908) and *Das Evangelium der*

- Hoffnung: Aus dem Schwedischen von H. Sellman* (Karadja 1900a). Huldine Beamish wrote articles for the English spiritist periodical *Light* (Rodin 1984, 5) and in 1888 gave lectures in the UK for Lord and Lady Mount Temple and a hundred guests ('Huldine Beamish' 1893). Karadja was born in Sweden but spent much of her life abroad and encountered spiritism in London ('Princessan Mary Karadja' 1896; 'Till princessan' 1943), while Fock was born in Ireland but later became the leader of Edelweissförbundet in Sweden (Nyman 1978, 2); Riksarkivet (Swedish National Archives), Stockholm (RA), Eric von Rosens arkiv, Handlingar rörande Edelweiss-förbundet 1883–1893, 4D:2, Huldine Fock, Svart anteckningsbok, 25 December 1892–29 September 1893, 26 Dec. 1892.
- 14 The findings presented in this essay are taken from my doctoral research project, *Spirit Communication: Living With and Through the Media at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*.
  - 15 Willburn & Kontou 2012, 1; Lehrman 2014, 165–6.
  - 16 Galvan 2010, 3.
  - 17 Warner 2006, 14–15.
  - 18 'Hypnotism och Spiritism', *Svenska Dagbladet* (4 Sept. 1891).
  - 19 'En kongress af nordens spiritister', *Aftonbladet* (23 Mar. 1911); Conan Doyle 1919, 116; Söderling 1920; Briem 1922, 300; 'En kongress af nordens spiritister', *Aftonbladet* (23 Mar. 1911).
  - 20 Herrlin 1901, 57; 'Anmälan', *Efteråt?* 128 (1902).
  - 21 'Spiritismen i Göteborg', *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* (31 Mar. 1890); 'En hälsning till den internationella spiritistiska kongressen i Genève i Maj 1913, I fransk översättning insänd till kongressens sekreterare', *Efteråt?* 264 (1913). For families practising spiritism, see Wicksell 1892; for circles of friends practising spiritism, see 'Malmö', *Snällposten* (14 May 1853).
  - 22 Kungliga Biblioteket (National Library of Sweden), Stockholm (KB), KB1/Ep R10 Mary Karadja to Ruhe, 1901; 'Princessan Karadja lever' 1943.
  - 23 RA, Eric von Rosens arkiv, Handlingar rörande Edelweiss-förbundet 1883–1893, 4D:2, Huldine Beamish, 'Klöfverbladet 19 May 1888, Nr 2'.
  - 24 Sumiala 2012, 1, 41.
  - 25 Editorial, 'Mysteria', *Mysteria* 1 (1929).
  - 26 H. L. Hansen, 'Fotografi och mystik', *Efteråt?* 45 (1895).
  - 27 Houghton 1882.
  - 28 E. Klm., 'En svensk läkares iakttagelser hos spiritisterna i Belfast och Crew', *Dagens Nyheter* (13 Feb. 1921).
  - 29 'Spiritistiska avslöjanden', *Jämtlandsposten* (3 Feb. 1919).
  - 30 Bremmer 2015, 17, 82.
  - 31 Bennett 2004.
  - 32 Hällgren 2013, 268, 270, 275.
  - 33 'Anmälan', *Efteråt?* 367 (1921).
  - 34 Bremmer 2015, 30, 130.

- 35 'Upptecknat för Efteråt. En muntlig berättelse av en svensk lärarinna,' *Efteråt?* 349 (1920).
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Karadja 1900b, 16.
- 38 Gitelman 2006, 7–8, 13, 20.
- 39 Gitelman 2006, 7–8, 13, 20; for social media, see Ekström 2010, 12–13.
- 40 For social media as new, see, for example, Jenkins et al. 2013, 2–3, 12, 160; for a historic perspective on participatory media, see, for example, Ekström 2010, 1 ff.
- 41 Ekström 2010, 4.
- 42 Ibid. 5–6.
- 43 S. D. S., 'Rättegång och Polissaker: Hofrätten öfver Skåne och Blekinge,' *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* (13 Nov. 1893); 'Till princessan' 1943.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Her published prose included *Mot ljuset* (Karadja 1899), *Två själars saga* (Karadja 1900c), *Röster ur det fördolda* (Karadja 1905) and her non-fiction included *Hoppets evangelium* (Karadja 1900d), *Det sjätte sinnets uppodling* (Karadja 1900e), *Spiritistiska fenomen och spiritualistiska vyer* (Karadja 1900b), *Ett gemmäle till docenten Herrlin* (Karadja 1901), and *Abend-affärens dokument* (1902). She also wrote for newspapers, for example 'Princessan Karadja' 1943; O. R., 'De spiritistiska séancerna,' *Svenska Dagbladet* (20 Oct. 1901).
- 47 Karadja 1902, 6: 'The press has declared Mrs. Abend to be a fraud—accordingly she is—shall—and has to be one!!!'
- 48 Ibid. 76.
- 49 Ibid. 77.
- 50 Ibid. 72.
- 51 Ibid. 61.
- 52 Ibid. 62.
- 53 Ibid. 72.
- 54 Winkelman & Baker 2010, 34–5, 38, 40.
- 55 Peirce 1877, 4–7.
- 56 Geels & Wikström 2017, 68–9.
- 57 Crary 1991.
- 58 Hällgren 2013, 51, 53.
- 59 Natale 2016, 3.
- 60 Karadja 1902, 37.
- 61 Peirce 1877, 4–7.
- 62 For a seance to work the circle had to be 'harmonious'. A single 'mischievous person' present would disrupt the 'sensitive medium' (Karadja 1902, 77).
- 63 Ekström 2010, 8–9.
- 64 Karadja 1902, 70
- 65 Ekström 2010, 144–5.

- 66 Geels & Wikström 2017, 222 ff.
- 67 Karadja 1902, 57, 71.
- 68 Ekström 2010, 212 ff.
- 69 Karadja 1902, 5.
- 70 With her education and knowledge of languages, her large, international circle of acquaintances, and her literary output, Karadja seems to have made an impression on her acquaintances and the general public ('Till prinsessan' 1943; 'Prinsessan Karadja lever' 1943).
- 71 KB, KB1/Ep R10 Mary Karadja to Ruhe, 1901.
- 72 See, for example, 'Fru Abend afslöjad', *Eksjötidningen* (29 Nov. 1901); 'Ett afslöjat medium?', *Oskarshamnstidningen* (30 Nov. 1901); 'Andar och gummi-ballonger', *Östgötabladet* (28 Jan. 1902).
- 73 Lagerkvist 2017, 103; Lagerkvist 2019, xi–xii; Ess 2019, 264.
- 74 Karadja 1902, 71.
- 75 Peters 2015, 14.
- 76 Karadja 1902, 56–8.
- 77 Nyman 1978, 2.
- 78 'Huldine Beamish' 1893; Rodin 1984, 17.
- 79 RA, Eric von Rosens arkiv, Handlingar rörande Edelweiss-förbundet 1883–1893, 4D:2, Huldine Fock, Svart anteckningsbok, 25 December 1892–29 September 1893, 8, 11, 26 Dec. 1892.
- 80 See, for example, RA, Eric von Rosens arkiv, Handlingar rörande Edelweiss-förbundet 1883–1893, 4D:2, Huldine Beamish, 'Klölfverbladet 30 January 1883–16 June 1888'; RA, Eric von Rosens arkiv, Carl och Huldine Fock: Brev och minnen Huldine Fock, 4BB:1, Huldine Fock to Mathilde Nilsson, 22 Aug. 1895.
- 81 Some members such as Mathilde Nilsson helped publish *Efteråt?* or attended the *Efteråt?* circle SLF: Spiritistiska Litteratur-Föreningen, with its discussions of spiritist literature, see 'En hälsning till den internationella spiritistiska kongressen i Genève i Maj 1913', *Efteråt?* 264 (1913). Members of Edelweiss-förbundet also discussed spiritist literature, see RA, Eric von Rosens arkiv, Handlingar rörande Edelweiss-förbundet 1883–1893, 4D:2, Huldine Beamish, 'Klölfverbladet 30 January 1883–16 June 1888', 24 May 1886: 'We had for a long time talked about Hartman's opinions about spiritism and read excerpts of his book.'
- 82 RA, Eric von Rosens arkiv, Handlingar rörande Edelweiss-förbundet 1883–1893, 4D:2, Huldine Fock, Svart anteckningsbok, 25 December 1892–29 September 1893, 16 Mar. 1893.
- 83 For imagination, see Sumiala 2012, 1, 41. For spiritists helping lost spirits, see RA, Eric von Rosens arkiv, Carl och Huldine Fock: Brev och minnen Huldine Fock, 4BB:1, Huldine Fock to Mathilde Nilsson, 22 Aug. 1895: 'Now I will ask you Maria & Mrs Hedman to pray warm, cordial prayers for Fingal. Pray each day, as he is in dire need thereof.' For spiritists helping others, see RA, Eric von Rosens arkiv, Handlingar rörande Edelweiss-förbundet 1883–1893, 4D:2,

- Huldine Beamish, 'Klöfverbladet 30 January 1883–16 June 1888', 23 Sept. 1889: 'Do not turn away from someone who wants your help, it might sometimes be burdensome for you to submit yourself to people's quirks, but just stay strong in your prayers.'
- 84 Peters 2015, 14, 21, 47.
- 85 Rodin 1984, 25.
- 86 RA, Eric von Rosens arkiv, Carl och Huldine Fock: Brev och minnen Huldine Fock, 4BB:1, Huldine Fock to Mathilde Nilsson, 26 May 1893.
- 87 See, for example, *ibid.* 26 May 1893; RA, Eric von Rosens arkiv, Carl och Huldine Fock: Brev och minnen Huldine Fock, 4BB:1, Huldine Fock to Mathilde Nilsson, 8 Aug. 1895; Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1934, 27.
- 88 RA, Eric von Rosens arkiv, Handlingar rörande Edelweiss-förbundet 1883–1893, 4D:2, Huldine Fock, Svart anteckningsbok, 25 December 1892–29 September 1893, 8 Feb. 1893.
- 89 For the Fock family holidays, see Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1934, 21–2.
- 90 RA, Eric von Rosens arkiv, Carl och Huldine Fock: Brev och minnen Huldine Fock, 4BB:1, Huldine Fock to Mathilde Nilsson, 14 Aug. 1895.
- 91 *Ibid.* Aug. 1895.
- 92 RA, Eric von Rosens arkiv, Handlingar rörande Edelweiss-förbundet 1883–1893, 4D:1, Huldine 'Sären' Fock, 'Anvisningar efter min död till Edelweiss Förbundets medlemmar i maj 1927'.
- 93 'Spiritistisk invasion', *Dagens Nyheter* (30 May 1929).

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