

# Edison, Psycho-Phone and ITC Technology

By John Streiff



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## *Abstract*

*Thomas A. Edison has been associated with many innovations and inventions. One of the most contentious discussions regarding Edison has centered on his interest in and involvement with technologies that might offer ways to communicate with the dead. In this paper, the author examines these claims and the counterclaims in the light of what is known about Edison, his beliefs, his work and newly available information that may shed new light on his interests. The reader is left to decide the true state of affairs.*

## **Introduction**

That technology might be employed to facilitate communications with those who are deceased has fascinated scientists and lay persons alike for over a century.

It is generally accepted that two such types of communications exist. One is known as Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP) an early term that was used in the English speaking world to designate a special kind of paranormal phenomena consisting of words or sounds of unknown origin recorded by electronic devices in a way that defied normal explanation. EVP involves sounds or voices mysteriously recorded on audio tape or digital recording devices either spontaneously or in response to questions put by the experimenters.

Professor Senkowski likely introduced the term Instrumental TransCommunications (ITC) at the beginning of the 1980s, to characterize a vast array of phenomena that transcended the scope of EVP. (Brune 1988)

The terms EVP and Psychophony previously used respectively in the English and the Latin speaking countries (including France, Italy, Portugal, Spain and South America) refer to a paranormal phenomenon that has caused excitement and incredulity throughout much of the world.

There is some dispute as to when the first voices were heard and recorded. While this is considered 20th century phenomenon, there were attempts made in the 19th century to contact the world of the dead using technology. Reputedly Thomas Edison, as he himself put it, worked on “a device to enable the spirits of the dead, if they existed, to communicate with the living”.

Edison’s invention purportedly consisted of a microphone installed inside a wooden box together with a large aluminum cone filled with potassium-permanganate and crossed by an electrode. One of the wires of the microphone cable was connected to the aluminum cone and the other to an aerial (Fernández 2002).

In his own words, reported in the newspaper 'Le Soir' Brussels, December 26, 1920, Edison said he wanted "to give the spirits an opportunity to communicate more efficiently than the tilt top tables, ... the Ouija board and other rough methods" that were considered the only ways of communicating (Grandsire 1993).

Assertions such as those above have been held up by proponents of EVP and ITC technologies as proof positive that Edison was indeed involved in this early research. However skeptics and historians are generally not so sure. Skeptics for example question whether a man of science such as Edison would have been disposed to even consider such things much less invest any time in them. Historians point to a lack of documentary and physical evidence as an additional indicator that Edison likely never engaged in this research. But are these obvious assertions necessarily true? Recent findings suggest that a reconsideration of the facts and these claims may be in order. At the same time, it may be the case as well that Edison was not as involved as proponents have claimed and believed in more recent times.

### **What Edison Said**

Skeptics have indicated that a scientist such as Thomas Edison would never have engaged in matters involving the spirit world. Here is what Edison is known to have said about the matter.

#### **1910**

In 1910 Edison claimed that he did not believe in spiritualism and preferred instead to place his trust in mechanics. In an often overlooked interview, the great inventor spoke of his then-current beliefs regarding spiritualism and survival of bodily death. In *The Columbian Magazine* (Marshall, 1910) Edison began by clarifying his position regarding the importance of a Supreme Being:

*"I never have denied Supreme Intelligence. What I have denied and what my reason compels me to deny, is the existence of a Being throned above us as a god, directing our mundane affairs in detail, regarding us as individuals, punishing us, rewarding us as human judges might. I do not wish to have the public think that I deny the merit of the world's great moral teachers - Confucius, Buddha, Christ. They were great men - truly wonderful."*

Edison continued, commenting on his position in 1910 regarding personal survival:

*"A man is not an individual; he is a vast collection of a myriad of individuals, just as a city is. The cell, minute and little known, is the real and only individual. A man is made of many million cells. His intelligence consists of the combined intelligence of them all, as a city's is made up of the combined intelligence of its inhabitants. Not being, in effect, an individual, how could he go to heaven or hell as an individual, be given a reward or any punishment, after death had caused the separation of his cells and the diffusion of their collective intelligence?"*

In other words, in 1910, Edison was uncomfortable with the concept of individual survival. Many skeptics and some historians have seized on his beliefs at this time in his life and from this have determined that Edison **never** believed such things. In later life Edison may have believed quite to the contrary.

In this same 1910 interview Edison commented on his thinking regarding mind and matter:

*“There are two worlds, the world of matter and the world of mind. Darwin has shown us how we have arisen in the world of matter, but it is the smaller world which he developed. Investigation in the other world, the world of mind, will show us more amazing things than Darwin, great man as he was, imagined. His Natural Law dealt with the things we call material. There is every indication that there is a mental law - a law which we may well discover to be based upon the fundamental principles laid down by the great teachers Christ, Confucius, Buddha. The limits of this mental law and of the mental world it governs, I cannot even guess. We are trembling on the brink of wonderful discoveries concerning such things. At present the mental world is bound by limitations imposed upon it by the world of matter, but matter has been partially subdued in many details. May not the telephone and telegraph, the X-ray, and a hundred other things be counted triumphs over matter? Remember, I am using these words 'mind' and 'matter' in their ordinary sense, not as they are used by any cultists.”*

Even at this point in his life when he was unwilling to consider survival, Edison clearly understood and embraced the 21st century notions of mind and matter as unified and yet separable.

When asked to comment on the 'soul' and its likely impact on future human development, Edison said:

*“I cannot conceive of more than the two worlds of matter and of mind. There are no miracles in either, but only logical and natural development, with, now and then, the appearance of a prodigy like Reese. He proves nothing, disproves nothing. ... He reads writing hidden by the folds of paper; he may very well have found lost articles as he has claimed to have done. He told you, for instance, where to find your pocketbook, when it had fallen into the inside of a folding bed which was closed tightly when he came into the room. These things would seem to mean abnormal sight, and indicate a general line of progress which we all may follow.”*

Joseph F. Rinn had something to say about the prodigy Reese as well. Rinn was a New York produce executive and amateur magician and mentalist. He was friends with the likes of Houdini, Thurston and Kellar whose names are often associated with the debunking of late 19th and early 20th century Spiritualist mediums. In his autobiography, *Sixty Years of Psychical Research* (Rinn, 1950) Rinn describes his visit to Benjamin Reese in New York City. According to Rinn, Reese used a well-known method to ascertain what had been written on folded pieces of paper, thus producing the illusion that he was able to see through material objects. This illustrates how simply even great minds can be fooled. Clearly, in 1910, Edison had been so fooled by Benjamin Reese. This does not imply all mediums were or are frauds. It does demonstrate that even men of science can be fooled if they let their guards down.

Edison continues, echoing in 1910 perhaps what would become his own, unheralded destiny:

*“We have merely scratched the surface of the store of knowledge which will come to us. I believe that we are now, a-tremble on the verge of vast discoveries - discoveries so wondrously important that they will upset the present trend of human thought and start it along new lines completely.”*

## 1919

By 1919, Edison appears to have altered his position. In correspondence with Mr. William B. Lamont in December of that year Edison wrote:

*“I believe that if our personality survives, than it is strictly logical or scientific to assume that it contains memory, intellect and other faculties and knowledge that we acquire here on this earth. Therefore, if personality exists after what we call death it's reasonable to conclude that those who leave the Earth would like to communicate with those that they have left here. I am inclined to believe that our personality hereafter will be able to affect matter. If this reasoning be correct, then, if we can evolve an instrument as delicate as to be affected, or moved, or manipulated by our personality as it survives in the next life, such an instrument, when completed, ought to receive something from the other side. ”*

## 1920s

The most commonly cited material in this regard is an Edison interview published in *Scientific American Magazine* on October 30, 1920. In this article, Edison repeated his by now oft-quoted belief that there should be a scientific explanation for mind and expressed again his confidence that a machine could be built to apprehend these 'entities' as he described them.

In the January 23, 1921 New York Times, Edison gave a comprehensive interview regarding new work he was embarking upon to try to understand the nature of life. While some have suggested that Edison was perpetuating a hoax, this author does not agree. Edison was not the sort of man given to such things. And his motives were clear: he believed that science had for too long ignored these important issues. His prime motivation for embarking upon this research lay in the collective grief of those who had lost loved ones in the recent War. (Rothman, 1921)

If one reads his actual words in this article and those cited in the article from previous interviews, it is frankly difficult to believe that this was in fact a hoax. Edison makes his case very clearly and strongly.

There is no doubt Edison intended to build an apparatus working from a theory of what he called 'life units'. When asked to describe the apparatus Edison declared [this] to be relatively unimportant. The interest of the people, he indicated, would be centered in whether the apparatus was successful rather than a description of it.

The reporter asked Edison “Do you earnestly feel that 'communication with the dead' can be established?” Mr. Edison said:

*“There is a doubt. I am not sure. That's the reason I am experimenting. But if I didn't believe, I wouldn't try.”*

Perhaps in these four short sentences is the most crystalline answer to this still-raging debate.

At the end of the article Edison sheds light on when he became motivated to begin his work in earnest:

*“I have been reading and working for fifty years. I was more closely attracted to the problem about three years ago. I was thinking of the war and the cruelty of nature. Billions of human prayers have been sent up, yet without apparent results. Malignant cruelty was apparent. I thought there might be a way of determining whether nature is as cruel as she appeared. ...*

*“Somebody has to explain this problem. Somebody has to start working on it scientifically. I hope my activities may set moving 500 other investigators. The ball has got to start a-rolling. I am taking a try at it.”*

Edison was motivated for some reason right around the time of World War I. While the obvious interpretation is that Edison was moved by the horrors of war, perhaps something else also occurred in this same interval that moved his interest forward.

American author Francis B. Grierson wrote his essay "*Illusions and Reality of War*" in 1918. Edison mentioned in January 1921 an active interest three years earlier in 1918. It was at this time that Grierson was writing about the fears of war. Grierson was a published author who was well-known to scholars of American literature. One of his better known works "*Abraham Lincoln, The Practical Mystic*" was also published in 1918 (Grierson, 1918b).

In 1913, Grierson's book "*Invisible Alliance*" (Grierson, 1913) was reviewed in a New York Times article entitled "*Optimism: Mr. Grierson as a Prophet of International Affairs.*"

It is fair to say Edison likely had heard of Francis B. Grierson.

The following passage appears on page 54 in an Edison biography (1929, Association of Edison Illuminating Companies) :

*" WE CANNOT ESTEEM TOO HIGHLY THE GREATNESS AND THE POWER OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT; NATURE CAN WITHHOLD NONE OF HER SECRETS FROM THE DETERMINED ATTACK OF THE INQUIRING MIND, BUT IT IS COMPELLED TO REVEAL HER RICHEST TREASURES AND HER DEEPEST DEPTHS AND DISCLOSE THEM BEFORE THE EYES OF HIM WHO SEEKS TO UNDERSTAND, READY FOR HIS USE AND ACCORDING TO HIS WILL."*

In Edison's copy of the galley for this book, below this is written in Edison's own hand:

*"The trouble is that most people don't know this.  
They will not try to bring out the enormous capacity of the brain.  
Thos A Edison"*

Thomas Edison had an interest in mental capacity and trying to understand its implications to mankind. It is doubtful he would have made these comments had he engaged in a hoax as some have claimed.

### **Francis Grierson Meets Thomas Edison**

Sometime prior to hostilities in Great Britain, American author Francis Grierson claimed to have met Edison in London. Grierson also was a Spiritualist medium working under his birth name of Jesse Shepard.

In communications with medium Bonnie Vent, Grierson has claimed he had a mid-day meal in an open-air cafe in Knightsbridge, London in the late summer or early fall with Thomas Edison. Grierson said that Edison wanted to ask him about mediumship. According to Grierson, Edison reasoned that if he could understand the natural process, he might be able to construct a device which simulated it. In other words, according to Grierson, Edison was seriously considering building a machine to in some way communicate with or understand the dead.

Could such a meeting have happened? According to a Grierson authority (Wickham 2006), Grierson was in fact in London in the years leading up to the first World War. He lived in the West End, not far from Knightsbridge, near Hyde Park. According to an Edison authority (Israel, 2009) Edison made a short trip in this time-frame to London and Europe for a rare family vacation. He was in London August 8th and 9th in 1911 according to his itinerary. It is therefore possible that the two men could have met and had the discussion to which Grierson alluded.

Bonnie Vent had no knowledge of these details.

Grierson mentions Edison in *Illusions and Realities of War* (Grierson, 1918a):

*Edison does not talk first then act. He does not stop to explain. He conceives and then creates. But when he is in the company of a man who understands, he indulges in a conversation, for it requires two for that kind of mental relaxation."*

Thus implying that Grierson had met Edison by this time. Continuing, Grierson speaks of fame:

*"If there is one man more than another supposed to be known to the American public, that man is Thomas Edison. Yet not one of the students at a great university where the question was asked recently: 'Who is the Wizard of Menlo Park?' could give a correct answer."*

Edison was known to have appreciated Nature. This is clear from his 1921 interview published in The New York Times. Edison was a genius at creating machines that artfully incorporated natural principles. He seems to be an ardent student of natural processes. It follows then that when presented with a problem involving detecting artifacts of mind that Edison would have sought to understand the issues in terms of natural process. This very well might have led him to meet well-known people that he believed might provide insight into these processes. Jesse Shepard, known to Edison as Francis Grierson, might well have been such a person.

### **Edison and Psycho-phones**

Advocates of the ITC and EVP communities often cite Edison as one of the early innovators in their respective fields. While it does seem apparent that Edison was interested in general in potential implications with regards to a future science of the mind, it is less clear what if any apparatus Edison actually built. Clearly when he gave his 1921 interview to the New York Times, some ideas were under consideration. But was a device ever constructed? And if it was what became of it and the plans?

Both sides of the debate have weighed in on this. Let us begin with what we know. There are apparently no surviving prototypes of any devices developed with this intent by Edison or any of his known colleagues. Likewise there are no authenticated plans of the device. Some might wish to stop any further considerations in light of these truths. However it was not uncommon for Edison and colleagues to destroy non-working and what Edison considered unimportant prototypes. Some prototypes of devices Edison is known to have considered and worked on no longer exist. While drawings tended to be kept, some especially early ones, are known to have been misplaced or lost. So it may be less indicative that neither a working device nor a drawing has survived.

In fact, one drawing has surfaced in Germany that purports to be a schematic of an early Edison spirit communication device. The drawing has been scrutinized by an Edison expert. The drawing was definitely not done by Thomas Edison although it is possible it was done by a colleague. The general belief however is the drawing is likely a fraud. The style of lettering and drawing does not match that of Edison and has not been matched to any of Edison's colleagues thus far. (Israel, 2009)

### **Psycho-Phone Messages**

A book was published in Los Angeles, California entitled *Psycho-Phone Messages* (Grierson, 1921). The text was written by American author Francis Grierson, otherwise known as medium Jesse Shepard. This is same person who supposedly met Thomas Edison in London in the early days of World War I.

The **Introduction** to this book was written by Grierson's long-time personal secretary Lawrence Tonner, who makes mention of Edison on the first page:

*“The word “psycho-phone” was first suggested and used by Mr. Francis Grierson in a lecture I heard him deliver before the Toronto Theosophical Society, August 31st, 1919 a year before Thomas Edison announced his intention of devising an instrument which he hopes will serve to establish intercourse between our world and the world of spirit.*

*My own experiences as a student in this sphere of psychic research in Europe and America, covering a period of thirty years, convince me that we have here a revelation of a new mode of spiritual communication unlike anything heretofore given to the world, not only different in quality but different in purpose.*

*From personal knowledge I can state that the recorder of these messages has not acted on any ideas advanced by anyone living on our plane.”*

From the above we might deduce that “psycho-phone” in this context meant a person who received and conveyed messages from the departed; in other words a Spiritualist medium in the late 19th century.

Francis Grierson may have been an early adopter of the term, but he was not the last person to use it.

### **Psycho-Phone Device**

In 1928, an inventor named A. B. Saliger founded the Psycho-Phone company in New York and proceeded to build a commercial device which he called the “Psycho-Phone”. This device was intended as a self-help aide. It enabled people to record stimulating suggestions which the device played back at a predetermined time while they slept. According to Saliger (Saunders, 1929):

*“The reason most of us cannot carry out our good intentions and be what we really desire to be is because we do not put the responsibility where it belongs—on the sub-conscious mind.”*

Saliger continued:

*“All your life, you are being influenced by suggestions ... But many of these suggestions are not constructive. People may suggest that you are dumb or stupid, or unattractive, that you are afraid and that you are a weakling. You may believe them. You are influenced, unconsciously, all the time by suggestion.”*

While Saliger's invention had far more to do with peoples' beliefs than anything else, he had stumbled onto a truism: in the latter decades of the 20th century, it was discovered in university sleep and dream studies that indeed the subconscious mind is more suggestible during sleep than at other times in some personality types. This detail was not known with scientific certainty in Saliger's time. Ultimately his device went the way of other luxuries in hard times and his company failed.

Saliger devices may have turned up in recent years. One appeared in the South around 2003. Through her interest in Jesse Shepard, Bonnie Vent had become aware in 2002 of the term “psycho-phone” but was not entirely sure what one was. When she discovered such a device in 2003, she published pictures of this device on her website <http://www.sdparanormal.com/page/page/265918.htm>.



## **Mediums and Edison**

Edison himself believed in the supremacy of technology over people, later in life he commented:

*“I spent a period of time deliberating on a machine or an apparatus which could be operated by personalities who have crossed over to a different area of existence, or into a different sphere. I believe that, if we are to make true progress in psychical research, we will have to do it in a scientific manner with scientific equipment.”*

Yet Edison may have had several contacts with individuals of a more spiritual persuasion. One of the first contacts may have been the aforementioned meeting with Francis Grierson in London, England. This meeting is undocumented aside from Grierson's mention of it to medium Bonnie Vent.

Shortly after Edison's death ... “in 1941, Edison purportedly came through the New York medium Mary Olson during a sitting for J. Gilbert Wright, the General Electric researcher who discovered silicone putty. During the séance, the purported Edison said, casually, *“I think it might interest you to see the blueprint of the device I was working on before I came over here.”*

Edison supposedly continued to direct Wright to locate a Mrs. Ellis who in turn referred Wright and his associate Harry C. Gardner to one Commander Wynne of Brooklyn. Wynne had the blueprints. He told Wright and Gardner that shortly after Edison's death in 1931, he, Ralph Fasch, Bill Gunther of Consolidated Edison and Edith Ellis formed “a society for Etheric Research” and tried out the Edison device but could not make it work. (Evans, 1963)

Another contact may have occurred in 1967 when Thomas Edison spoke through Austrian clairvoyant Sigrun Seuterman, in trance, about his earlier efforts in 1928 to develop equipment for recording voices from the beyond. Edison also made suggestions as to how to facilitate video ITC during these sessions.

About 60 years after his death, Edison's image may have appeared on a computer screen in Luxembourg in 1991 along with that of film maker George Cukor who died in 1983. This type of video ITC is far more compelling and difficult to dismiss due to the clarity of many of the images involved.

Over 40 years after speaking with Seuterman, Edison made at least one more mediumistic appearance. An engineer contacted Bonnie Vent in 2004 because of her mention of the Psycho-phone on her website. In his first email to her, the engineer only asked Bonnie to tell him about his son. From her reply, the engineer determined Bonnie had in fact been in contact with his deceased son. The engineer wanted to build a device to speak with his son and requested Bonnie assist him by contacting Thomas Edison to ask some questions he had prepared. Bonnie had never spoken with Edison before and so contacted an established connection, Jesse Shepard to connect to Edison. Once this was done, Bonnie took the list of questions provided by the engineer and asked them of Edison. Replies were forthcoming and were subsequently relayed to the engineer, who in turn indicated the answers were useful and meaningful and that he was proceeding to build the device.

During these same communications Edison said a few words regarding the device and its ultimate fate. Apparently the device produced strong electrical fields and was particularly dangerous during periods of high humidity. Apparently too, Edison believed high humidity conditions were optimal for the device. Edison claimed that workers had been shocked on more than one occasion, and that he had finally decided to terminate the project when an experimenter was thrown across the laboratory. It is not possible to confirm these claims. This might explain though, why no prototypes and no drawings of the apparatus exist today.

It does seem that there was a need each time that Edison may have appeared on these occasions. Consider that Edison himself, in his 1921 New York Times interview, clearly stated that his key

motivation was the uncertainty and suffering brought on by the wrath of Nature. He seemed most interested in helping people through whatever contribution he could make given his background.

Perhaps these stories are not so far-fetched. Perhaps Edison would like us to know of his true interests then and even now.

### ***Recent ITC Developments***

In the years following Edison's death in 1931 several inventors claimed to have either access to Edison plans or said they were building on Edison's concepts in various ways.

More recently inventor Frank Sumption developed an ITC technology that has come to be known as "Frank's Box". Others in the EVP and ITC communities have used this device and others similar to it in their continued attempts to talk with deceased communicators. From this lore has emerged the notion that Edison and others involved in early EVP and ITC development have attempted to communicate with their modern-day counterparts.

Mr. Sumption has indicated that despite these notions, none of his personal innovations have ever been inspired by any spirit communicators. He has confirmed that, one at least one occasion, he heard the words "Edison here..." emanate from one of his boxes. This, according to Sumption, is the extent of anything to do with Edison and his own work (Sumption, 2008).

### ***Summary***

It is presumptuous for anyone to claim with any level of authority that they have 'solved' this mystery for the simple reason that there is insufficient evidence. However, a few things by now should be reasonably clear.

Edison was inspired in later life to look into the mysteries of life, death and the life hereafter. He seems to have had something of an understanding of what he believed to be the problem and indicated at several times his real and immense interest in making his personal contribution. His efforts seemed very genuine at all stages.

It is less clear if Edison ever actually built a device. On the one hand skeptics and some historians point to the lack of drawings and surviving prototypes. On the other, we have the words of Edison himself, time and again describing his intentions and even something of the nature of the device he contemplated.

After his death, Edison may have made himself known to many individuals; we simply do not know the scope. If he has done so, it could well be that he is still attempting to make his contribution.

Ultimately he was not been successful in this particular endeavor during his life, of that point there is no debate. However, this new evidence suggests that not only did he attempt to build the device but even now hints that he may still be continuing to try to solve the mystery.

Are we truly in a position to re-judge Edison's motives, when they seemed so clear during his lifetime?

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### ***Postscript – Bonnie Vent's Mediumship and the Research Process***

The author would like to write a few words about Bonnie Vent, her mediumship and the process by which the received information is reviewed for historical accuracy.

Unlike other mediums, Bonnie Vent does not do traditional 'readings'. There are no classic 'sittings'. Bonnie routinely does something few other mediums even attempt: she serves as a 'spirit advocate.' Bonnie's 'clients' are the deceased; those who cannot easily speak for themselves. They make themselves known to Bonnie spontaneously. They communicate conversationally – Bonnie can hear their voices and see images as they speak. She tries to ascertain what they want and also get some information from them to ensure they are in fact who they claim.

Once this information has been gathered she passes it to her research partner, the author. He in turn looks into the background of the information independent of Bonnie. Sometimes he is actually involved in the communications, speaking interactively with the communicating individuals. Most of the work however is tedious research. The same documents and sources that are routinely used by historians are employed to validate the information presented. The specificity of the communications is determined using established analysis methods for anecdotal information developed in the field of research parapsychology. This is necessary since there is no single point of authority with respect to the veracity of the information. The research process can take years given the depths and details that are required for what we consider reasonable validation.

This approach represents a breakthrough in mediumistic communications and its interpretation. And it has yielded interesting results, including suggesting modifications to history. Among some of the notable individuals with whom Bonnie Vent has communicated and the communications vetted include: crocodile hunter Steve Irwin, comedian Charles Nelson Reilly, actor Heath Ledger, psychic Peter James, and recently comedian George Carlin. Among the historical figures that have communicated are the Beautiful Stranger of the Hotel del Coronado, Thomas and Anna Whaley (of San Diego's Whaley House), Spiritualist medium and author Jesse Shepard (also known as Francis Grierson) and inventor Thomas A. Edison.

We suggest that others seriously interested in investigating claims of mediumship consider this approach and hold their subjects to equally high standards. If this is done, it may be possible to use information provided in such a manner with far more confidence and understanding than ever before.