Considering that many in this field consider the “Telephone to the Dead” to be the touchstone of radio-based Instrumental Transcommunication as we know it today, I think it is wise to shed some light on the topic. The “Telephone to the Dead” is the name that was given to the device Thomas Edison was working on in the last decade of his life. In multiple essays on spiritualism written during the early 1920’s (all are available in the book *The Diary and Sundry Observations of Thomas Edison* by Dagobert Runes, 1948*), Edison tried to grapple with the concept of how the spirit could exist after death. He thought that the “life units” that were unknown by science joined together to create every animate (and possibly inanimate) object. Upon death, these life units broke up into their respective individual units and joined another form after human death.

This is a theory which is obviously unproven and may even be considered patently false because of the technology that has been advanced by ninety plus years since Edison espoused this theory. Edison knew of electrons, and he figured that the life units were even smaller than electrons. Edison based this theory upon the physics concept of energy interchangeability: “I believe, rightly or wrongly, that life is undestructable, it is true, and I also believe that there has always been a fixed quantity of life on this planet, and that this quantity can neither be increased or decreased.” On Edison's Earth, nothing, not even life, could be created or destroyed; so he therefore assumed that life units changing from one form to another were responsible for all life on this planet.

If, according to Edison's beliefs, the “life units” of the spirit broke up upon death to join another form, how could a personality exist in the afterlife? Edison was vexed by this idea and struggled to come up with a theory which would allow for life after death to exist. To make this theory a viable one, he utilized the idea of “swarms.” Edison was convinced that swarms of life units were responsible for not only the thinking and memory of humans, but for every life function of every plant and animal. His evidence that swarms life units were responsible for memory consisted of the fact that someone can burn their fingertips badly enough to remove all the skin in a blister, but yet, the fingerprint whorls would grow back the same way. These swarms moved from one form to another after the human body, which served as merely a vessel for these swarms, passed on. Edison believed that these swarms of life units were responsible for all evolution (he gives the example of wooly mammoths and elephants, daisies and blue daisies). Edison's whole swarm theory and life after death revolved around the Broca's Area of the brain. The Broca's Area was thought to be responsible for the seat of both memory and personality due to the results of “eighty-two surgical operations.” Edison felt that if the swarms of life units that made up the Broca's area could continue to exist
in a swarm after death, then the personality could live on and there could be a life force after death that could be contacted. We have learned since Edison's time that the Broca's Area is responsible for language comprehension and development.

Regardless of Thomas Edison's misinformed understanding of biology, he was inventive genius who was astoundingly capable of developing devices to serve a purpose. During the last decade of his life, he turned to inventing a device that would be capable of communicating with any sentence that existed beyond the grave. In “Spiritualism,” written in 1920, Edison postulated that, “For my part, 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 so delicate as to be affected, or moved, or manipulated - whichever term you want to use - by our personality as it survives in the next life, such an instrument, when made available, ought to record something.” Edison continued an attempt to develop this device. He continued in this essay: “I have been at work for sometime building an apparatus to see if it is possible for personalities which have left this earth to communicate with us.”

This instrument has been dubbed as the “Telephone to the Dead,” and currently, this instrument that Edison was working on has never turned up. Edison never referred to his device as the Telephone to the Dead; it is a name that has been given to this device by paranormal researchers. In his essays, the item he was working on was likened to a valve that would amplify the ability for the swarms to manipulate the object so that “it does not matter how slight is the effort, it will be sufficient to record whatever there is to be recorded.” Until this day, the plans for Edison’s device have yet to be discovered and the Edison Estate (and many skeptics) claim that Edison must therefore have never worked on a device to communicate with the dead despite these essays saying the exact opposite.

I would like to point out that the Edison Estate not only redacted the 80+ pages of spiritualism from his diary and had it repressed, but the estate also held on to his documents for over 50 years until they were sent to Rutgers University.

Edison continued to work on the “Telephone to the Dead” until he became comatose in 1931 and died shortly thereafter. Before dying, Edison briefly came out of his coma and said to his wife, Mina, who was keeping vigil at his bedside, and his doctor that “It is very beautiful over there!” Did Edison learn something about the afterlife while in a comatose state? Where is the instrument he was working on? Where are the instrument's plans?

I would not be doing this article justice if I did not address the skeptical side of the Telephone to the Dead. From my research, I have yet to come up with a reason why Edison has been equated with this term. Spiritual phones were being used in the 1940’s and their usage may have been anachronistically applied to Edison’s work. The first mentioning of Edison working on such a device was in the October 1920 issue of American Magazine. Interviewed by B.C. Forbes (later of Forbes magazine), it was
revealed that Edison was developing an electrical device to speak with the dead. This was the same year that he wrote his essay on Spiritualism which was featured in Scientific American. He also gave an interview to the New York Times in 1921 which stated that he was more than willing to discuss life after death only in terms of life units. These articles, plus the additional publications from Runes' publication of Edison's diary, solidly point to the fact that Edison was in fact working on a device to communicate with the dead. Skeptics claim that Edison's interview with Forbes was merely a joke being played by Edison and that his followup in Scientific American was a way to extend that joke. A careful reading of these articles plus his others from his diary collection will show that Edison truly believed in his work and the same theories are postulated again and again by him.

The most damning evidence of Edison and his spiritual beliefs came in the form of an October 1933 essay in Modern Mechanix. This article purports to have been written about a secret meeting in 1920 in Edison's lab where he tried to communicate with the dead. Complete with illustrations describing how Edison set up a beam projector and photoelectric receiver with delicate instruments that would register anything (including smoke) that would cross the beam's path. This group of scientists sat there for hours and nothing happened.

But, what does this prove? Precisely the fact that Edison was interested in the afterlife and was working on devices to prove it. This "experiment" was published about in 1933, two years after Edison's death and thirteen years after the experiment. This leads to questionable motives on the part of Modern Mechanix magazine. Where they inclined to be iconoclastic in nature? This experiment, being performed in 1920, does not give credence to the followup work that Edison did during the last decade of his life. It is clear from essays he wrote later that his work continued at least into late 1922 and that he was still developing a device.

But where is his final device? Where are the prototypes? Where are the plans? These questions have gone unanswered for decades. The Edison estate has avowed that Thomas was never involved in work with a device to communicate with the dead because no plans, or instruments, have ever turned up that point towards his attempt at instrumental transcommunication.

In the last decade, many ITC researchers have had a male voice come through claiming to be Edison. Is it possible that Thomas Edison is trying to communicate with us? Other researchers have had both male and female voices coming through offering technical advice for improving ghost boxes. Are these entities the spirits of departed humans trying to build a bridge to help us communicate with them better?

Currently, we have no answers other than what ITC voices tell us.
* Only the first edition of this book has the section on Spiritualism. I have in my possession two "first" editions of this book by Edison. The very first publication run contains the information on spiritualism. After the book became public, his family called for the section to be redacted and a different "first" version was made available. If you are searching for this book, please check the page count. The version with the section on spiritualism has 247 pages.