Wireless Chaos*

BÉLA BALÁZS

Beware, my friends: the walls that divide us are falling. The space, for example, that in earlier times so nicely isolated the inhabitants of our quite sizable globe (the way vicious animals or madmen are kept apart). This space is now being devoured by high-speed trains and airplanes, and widely separated peoples who formerly had no notion of one another’s existence are now able to kill one another with ease. But technology is not content. With film and the phonograph people could already capture a person’s spitting image and voice and transport them endless distances. People could talk to each other from one country to the next. In fact, technology seems to have set out to bombard an individual’s isolation with thousands of possibilities for contact, to link each person to everybody else and stir them together to create, as the sole dish on the planet, a vast human porridge. Even so, the relationships among people have continued to be personal in nature. Though distance no longer particularly matters, it is still up to me whom I choose to be in touch with, and a telephone conversation is still a private affair.

Soon, very soon, everyone will have his own radio. People will tune to a given frequency and listen to whatever they wish, and no one will know or be able to prevent it. The air is alive with inaudible waves. People will tap into their individual devices and all of a sudden a concert broadcast from the Eiffel Tower in Paris will resound in their ears. If they don’t care for that, they can press the lever and promptly hear Lloyd George speaking in London. If they choose the wrong frequency or simply tune in at random they can listen to somebody singing in Chicago, a news broadcast from Stockholm, or a conversation between the Japanese naval minister and one of his warships far out at sea. Distance has altogether ceased to exist for wireless telephony. But also a free choice of direction. For the originating stations are broadcasters, and they scatter their waves to all points of the compass. Telephone wires carried human contact from person to person. The individual’s sphere of influence was expanded, but channeled, so to speak. His words were his private possessions, and he passed them on to whomever he wished. But words spoken into a

* Typescript [ca. 1924], Balázs files in the archives of the Academy of Arts, Budapest; first published in Ein Baedeker der Seele: Und andere Feuilletons, ed. Hanno Loewy (Berlin: Verlag Das Arsenal, 2002).
radio telephone are no longer private possessions. The person using a radio telephone has no private communications. He addresses the whole world, like an actor speaking in a darkened theater. The radio telephone creates utter exposure.

It is impossible to imagine what might become of this. The lives of all mankind are revealed in these voices in the air. One simply listens in. A single man's scream can be heard by millions, like the S.O.S. of a sinking ship. Humanity becomes a concrete reality instead of merely an abstract concept. Private relationships, as the last bonds between individuals, fall away, and the ancient curse of loneliness is rescinded in a universal blending together, millions caught up in the world's vast gruel. . . . Or will it be precisely the opposite? Individualism, as we all know, is a recent development, born precisely as the soul's self-defense against modern congestion.

And alas, such isolation spells anarchy. You will see soon enough that radio will shake the foundations of human society. You still think . . . yes, today you can still think, but tomorrow you won't be able to have opinions at all, for you won't know who is speaking to you and whom you should believe.

As it happens, wireless telephony removes the possibility of any kind of censorship, any oversight and identification. A piece of news comes along the airwaves and you have no idea where it is from. You cannot know; for anyone at all can set up a broadcasting station and with it say whatever he wants to millions, and there is no way to stop him. Any blatant lie can be spread unchecked—and perhaps even more dangerous, any grain of truth. Will stock exchanges manage to survive, will people be able to engage in politics, when everyone can hear everything and no one knows what to be believe? You have no idea what dangers threaten.

We will all simply have to judge for ourselves whether a report is true or not. But knowing for certain will be completely impossible. We cannot witness everything ourselves. Formerly there was never an issue of something's probability or improbability but solely of the credibility of the people reporting it. One person believed what he read in the Kreuzzeitung; another what was written in the Rote Fahne. Our opinions, and the public opinion they combine to form, were erected like a solid edifice incorporating the "mind of the people." This edifice, mind you, will collapse. We will no longer have any opinion, no way of evaluating things that we do not see with our own eyes. Everything that happens will be interpreted in various ways. Heretofore we have known which newspaper or which commentator to turn to for interpretation. But on the radio, the Communist can pose as a Fascist and the Fascist as a Communist. And before we have a chance to consult the next day's newspaper (which itself can be duped by misleading news sources) to see if the thing was true, disaster may already have struck. For society is not based on our judgment but on trust and prestige, and it is strengthened by an incredible network of telegraph and telephone wires.

When this network is dismantled, everything will collapse. You will see. Here waves, there waves, a tornado of bits of news and opinion that will lead to chaos. People will trust no one but themselves. Woe unto them.