

Wanted – Professors of Foresight!

H. G. Wells

When I was a student, half a century ago, we used to talk of the abolition of distance, because of those then comparatively recent triumphs, the telegraph, the steamship and the railway train. Some of us knew already of the possibility of radio, but nobody believed we should live to take a ticket and fly around the world. The swiftest thing upon the road was a bicycle, and television seemed a fantastic impossibility.

All my life I have seen that abolition of distance becoming more and more complete. Much of what you have heard as matter of fact tonight would have seemed fantastic when I was already a young man. And even now I am not very old. In a little while all round the earth will be a few days' journey, and everybody will be potentially within sight and sound of everybody all over the planet. There will be no more distance left and little separation.

You will be able to see and talk to your friends anywhere in the world as easily and surely as you send a telegram today. So plainly are things driving in that direction, that it would be childish to argue about this or elaborate it. Before another half century has passed everybody, so to speak, will be on call next door. You cannot doubt it.

All this is wonderful - all that we have done and all that we are plainly going to do. But I want to call your attention to something still more wonderful - something that we have not done. For all practical purposes we have not even begun to think yet what we are going to do about this abolition of distance. We have let it happen to us and we are going on as though it did not matter at all. We are all of us behaving as though there were no need whatever to adapt our lives and ideas in any way to these new conditions. But, indeed, that adaptation is the most urgent need of the present time.

It seems an odd thing to me that though we have thousands and thousands of professors and hundreds of thousands of students of history working upon the records of the past, there is not a single person anywhere who makes a whole-time job of estimating the future consequences of new inventions and new devices. There is not a single Professor of Foresight in the world. But why shouldn't there be? All these new things, these new inventions and new powers, come crowding along; every one is fraught with consequences, and yet it is only after something has hit us hard that we set about dealing with it.

See how unprepared our world was for the motor car. The motor car ought to have been anticipated at the beginning of the century. It was bound to come. It was bound to be cheapened and made abundant. It was bound to change our roads, take passenger and goods traffic from the railways, alter the distribution of our population, congest our towns with traffic. It was bound to make it possible for a man to commit a robbery or murder in Devonshire overnight and breakfast in London or Birmingham. Did we do anything to work out any of these consequences of the motor car before they came?

We did nothing to our roads until they were choked; we did nothing to adjust our railroads to fit in with this new element in life until they were overtaken and bankrupt; we have still to bring our police up to date with the motor bandit. That is what I mean by want of Foresight. In the case of the motor car we have let consequence after consequence take us by surprise. Then we have tried our remedies belatedly. And exactly the same thing is happening in regard to every other improvement in locomotion

and communication. We are abolishing distance, heedlessly, recklessly. Isn't it plain that we ought to have not simply one or two Professors of Foresight but whole Faculties and Departments of Foresight doing all they can to anticipate and prepare for the consequences of this gathering together, this bunching up, which is now going on, of what were once widely dispersed human relationships? We need to organise Foresight in these matters very urgently indeed, because, you see, it is not only that men will be able to get at and see and talk to their friends anywhere; they will also be able to get at those they suppose their enemies with an equal facility. You have not had that side of progress put to you quite so vividly tonight, for various reasons.

Let me ask you how long you suppose it is before it becomes possible for men to pack up a parcel of explosives or poison gas or incendiary matter or any little thing of that sort and send it up into the air to travel to just any chosen spot in the world and drop its load. For my own part I do not think it is going to be so very long before that is practicable. Our military people still stick to guns that carry one twenty miles or so, or airplanes that must fight their way through hostile planes and gunfire, to drop whatever they do drop. But nobody believes that these things mark the extreme range of offensive activities. Air torpedoes for anywhere, bomb, gas and flame delivered wherever you like, or don't like, at any time, this is one of the manifest possibilities to which all this improvement in communication is leading - that is to say if we go on much longer without taking hold of the war problem much more courageously than we have done hitherto. Tonight we are confronted with two facts, one bad and one good; the first, which has only been hinted at, that acts of war have become hideously immediate and far reaching; and the second that the whole round world can be brought together into one brotherhood, into one communion, one close-knit freely communicating citizenship, far more easily today, than was possible with even such a little country as England a century ago.

There are no Professors of Foresight as yet, but I am by way of being an amateur. Let me draw a plain conclusion from tonight's audition. Either we must make peace throughout the world, make one worldstate, one world-pax, with one money, one police, one speech and one brotherhood, however hard that task may seem, or we must prepare to live with the voice of the stranger in our ears, with the eyes of the stranger in our homes, with the knife of the stranger always at our throats, in fear and in danger of death, enemy-neighbours with the rest of our species. Distance was protection, was safety, though it meant also ignorance and indifference and a narrow, unstimulated life. For good or evil, distance has been done away with. This problem of communications rushes upon us today - it rushes upon us like Jehu the son of Nimshi. It drives furiously. And it evokes the same question: is it peace?

Because if it is not to be peace foreseen and planned and established, then it will be disaster and death. Will there be no Foresight until those bombs begin to rain upon us?

H.G. Wells produced many novels and works of non-fiction about the future. The foregoing piece was aired by the BBC on 19 November, 1932 at the end of a radio program about communications. Though short, the essay has a powerful impact because the principle of foresight carries greater force now than it did over half a century ago.

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