

THINK STUFF UNWANTED

BY HORACE J. HUBBELL

I SHALL call it the Amalgamated News, which is not its name. It is one of the great American news agencies, and it has correspondents all over the world. One of its high aims, as everyone who has ever attended any of its staff dinners knows, is to interpret the ideas and ideals of foreign nations to the people of the United States. I worked for it for a year. I came away with doubts.

During my term of service one of my colleagues, under the spell of the official view of the organization's functions, turned out a series of learned and serious articles upon political and economic conditions in the country where he was working. He was a good reporter, and he did a careful and accurate job. But the reaction of the home office was swift and unmistakable. It took the form of a crisp three-word cable: "Think stuff unwanted." My colleague, a very intelligent fellow, learned his lesson quickly. In his later more august post as cable editor of the agency he displayed a rare zest for exposing and denouncing any symptoms of "think stuff" in the cable and mail stories which came to his desk.

The Amalgamated News maintains a very valuable and instructive house-organ known as the *Log*. Herein, along with the record of its current victories and defeats, expressed in such terms as "Ahead Greek revolution; beaten Chinese fire on American destroyers; Paris divorce tipster sold us one three weeks old" are often set down such terse epigrammatic definitions of news as: "How many corpses? That tells whether it's a story." The future historian of the American press, bewildered and

overwhelmed by his mass of raw material, will find his task vastly simplified if he discovers a few of these *Logs*. The guiding principles of latter-day American journalism are summed up in them with entire frankness and in a vivid and charming form.

With "think stuff" barred, what does the Amalgamated News really want from its hirelings in foreign parts? One of the best numbers of the *Log* gave as the six most desirable subjects for mail articles: "women, liquor, wealth, religion, science and immorality." What is desired in the scientific field is not an interview with Professor Einstein on the implications of his theory of relativity; it is a sensational statement by some foreign quack (as if there were not plenty of them in America!) to the effect that he has discovered a cure for cancer, established an air route between the earth and the moon, or transformed the sun's rays into a source of motor energy. I recall an instance when a correspondent cabled a palpably absurd story about a serum distilled from the internal secretions of a bull and warranted to cure all human ailments. The story got honorable mention in the *Log*. But hear the president of the organization, addressing his slaves:

Next to religious stories and stories about religious fights, radio is about the most interesting topic in the world all the way around the world. It ranks better than professional sport in the United States to-day. . . . There's a Chinese New Year and a Jewish New Year which are always good for stories. . . . We ought to have a story on what the Prince of Wales is going to wear on Easter Day. . . . What has become of the horses of Malines that were so wonderfully intelligent and about which we worried so much in the early part of the war?

The Prince of Wales is apparently the most interesting personage in the world to many millions of freeborn Americanos, and so the files of the *Log* are filled with complaints, suggestions and pleas for every scrap of available news about him. Thus the cable editor lately inquired of the London Bureau:

Anything on matrimonial chitchat about the Prince of Wales or the rest of the family, now that he's back on the home grounds? Also what's he doing with himself—anything spectacular in the night-club line or following any pretty actresses?

At another time there was an appeal to "keep astride of this Wales-Princess Astrid story (not to use a bad pun)" together with a complaint that a rival news-gatherer had beaten the Amalgamated man on the news that the Prince had been made an honorary midwife and surgeon. "Wales is a story, especially if he's a midwife or has twins or does otherwise novel things," commented the erudite cable editor. Subsequently there was a complaint that "the London opposition ['opposition' is the technical characterization of a rival news-agency] carried the double story regarding missiles thrown at Wales in restaurant and at Hotel Cecil, where Baldwin was speaking. We lost the play because we got only the Baldwin incident, whereas Wales as usual got into the headlines."

Responding to this constant pressure from the home office the London Bureau supplied various engaging tidbits about the Prince, making up one story to the effect that he pronounced certain words with an American accent, and digging up the fact that, for some inscrutable reason, His Royal Highness had acquired the nickname of the *Pragga Wagga* during his Oxford student days. But the New York office's hankering for romance was unsatisfied, and so the *Log* soon printed the following desperate appeal:

Worn a subject as it is, even the possible engagement of the Prince of Wales still is page one news, and any stretch of the imagination that would produce an engagement story would be welcomed.

But this impressed the manager of the London Bureau as a bit too thick, and he entered a virtuous protest to the effect that "personally, I do not believe that Amalgamated Newsers should resort to 'any stretch of the imagination' to produce any sort of story whatever, and certainly the London Bureau will not." A reasonable degree of accuracy, indeed, is important even to a news agency, for when there are too many fakes its clients are apt to protest, but accuracy becomes painful to an up-and-coming cable editor when the true facts of an incident prove to be less thrilling than the first exaggerated reports would indicate. This is evident from the following *Log* extract:

Prague's munitions wagon explosion caused plenty of trouble owing to Blank's message putting the dead at ninety-two and immediate subsequent message revising the figure to three. I don't know what the editors said when they got the correction but they probably said plenty.

II

Scoops and beats are the primary sources of joy and grief to the gentleman of the Amalgamated News. A scoop, it may be explained, is an exclusive story, while a beat is a story obtained well in advance of the competing agencies. The Amalgamated News General Staff shouts with triumph whenever a cable reaches the New York office fifteen minutes ahead of the opposition's cable, and falls into deep despondency if it is necessary to report: "Prince of Wales' broken collarbone appeared to be a little behind the opposition." Sometimes this zeal for beats leads to regrettable consequences, as the following extract from the *Log* indicates:

Had bad luck in killing off Cardinal Mercier too early, although we did some quick retrieving here.

A major tragedy in the field of beats occurred, unhappily enough, just at the opening of the New Year, 1926. Let the mournful cadences of the cable editor tell the story:

Amalgamated News took the beating of the season on Prince Carol's renunciation of the Rumanian throne. It was there, complete and masterful. We had not a line. The fault, of course, lies in the fact that we are not now and never have been properly protected in Bucharest. . . . An amazing thing about the Carol story is that it was not until 8 p. m., Friday, New York time, that we finally got a Bucharest date-line into the report. That was almost twenty-four hours after the story appeared here on the streets.

And to fill up this cup of gall and worm-wood to overflowing, the cable editor gave way to the following gloomy reflection:

XYZ [a rival news agency] outguessed an Amalgamated Newser somewhere by putting Prince George of England among the rescuers at the Hong Kong hotel fire. Without the Prince there was no story, and we had all but him. Princes have been poison for us this week.

That the Amalgamated News has learned the lessons of war propaganda was demonstrated by the very different version of the Prince Carol episode which appeared in the *Amalgampress*, a weekly published for the edification of its newspaper clients. Here there was no word of being almost a whole day behind the hated opposition in the announcement of the Prince's abdication; no hint that "princes have been poison for us." On the contrary the *Amalgampress* grandly boasted that "when Prince Carol of Rumania renounced his throne for love it was through the Amalgamated News that he related his personal story in an interview at Milan."

To an impartial observer it seems that, despite all its commendable strivings, despite the alternating triumphal pæans and heartbroken laments of the *Log*, the Amalgamated News has scarcely achieved a position of complete equality with its most hated competitor, the XYZ, in the matter of getting the news first and getting it right. The XYZ seems to have a more far-flung organization, and that organization protects it against defeat in the high enterprise of recording the antics of princes and bomb-throwers in the more out-of-the-way parts of the Balkans. Moreover, there is a flavor of sour grapes in the boast of the *Amalgampress* that "the Amalgamated News operates directly through

its own correspondents and distributing bureaux abroad, without alliances with 'official' or otherwise subsidized agencies." These despised official agencies, operated by various European governments for their own purposes, are often dishonest, but nevertheless they are potential sources of important news, especially in countries such as Italy and Russia, where censorship prevail and news is often first given out in the form of statements from the official agency. If a Zinoviev is expelled from the Political Bureau of the Communist Party or an enterprising would-be assassin takes a potshot at Mussolini the chances are about a hundred to one that the XYZ will get the first story through its loathsome dealings with the official agency.

But what it thus lacks in technical facilities the Amalgamated News has always tried to make up in pep and originality. It is seldom that a *Log* passes without some appeal for increased concentration on these qualities. This appeal sometimes takes on a shrill staccato character, especially when it appears that the opposition is stealing the thunder of the Amalgamated News by jazzing up its own sober style of reporting. Here is a characteristic S O S from the New York cable desk:

May I preface my bouquets and brickbats this week by telling you: The mail product is in the doldrums. It needs a lot of waking up. Pep; color; oddity; originality; enterprise. Sometime ago I told you of the New York *Times* man's observation that the XYZ was trying to speed up and brighten up, but that it was hard to teach an elephant to dance. It was a merry quip. But the elephant is learning to dance. He's turning out some gay steps from all over the world, and they're treading over the front pages, and onto our toes.

Passing from the general to the specific the cable editor acknowledged "good action on Mexico's position toward United States note," but lamented that the agency fared "awfully on the picturesque bandit hold-up and cremation at Guadalajara. I'd trade half a dozen notes myself for one like the bandits. And speaking of trading, I'd swap a political piece most any day

for one like London's interview with old man Carlisle, who wants the Merry Widow waltz played at his cremation."

The Amalgamated News, like every other news agency, takes pains to impress on all its correspondents the value and importance of the mail story. Its business office is constantly on the alert for excessive expenditures for cable tolls, and most of the time its standing order to foreign correspondents reads: "Hold down to the limit on cables. But give us lots of spicy mailers, which can be wired from New York as cable stuff." This is a great game: this writing of mail stories which are subsequently supplied with a today dateline and set before the unsuspecting reader as proofs of the munificent character of his favorite paper's cable service. A common device is to send by mail all the available advance facts about some ceremony which is timed to occur on a definite date. A two-word cable on the date of the ceremony releases the mail story. This scheme is surely not reprehensible—when it works. But lamentable mishaps sometimes occur. The harassed correspondent at the scene of the show may forget to send a cable releasing the mail story at the right time. Or he may neglect to cable some essential correction. Or the home office may fail to heed his correction, with disastrous results for all concerned.

It is a curious but unmistakable fact that hardened cable editors, experienced in the art of turning mailers into fictitious cables, are often unable to spot the handiwork of the opposition when it resorts to the same trick. On several occasions the New York cable editor of the Amalgamated denounced me for not cabling a story which the opposition had sent by mail and subsequently dressed up convincingly in cable guise.

What mail stories are apt to get a front page play in the American public prints? On this point I have an abundance of evidence in the shape of congratulations vouchsafed to correspondents by the watchful cable editor, who is naturally in

close touch with the reactions of the Amalgamated News' clients. Let the *Log* of a day last April answer:

There was an excellent box from Dash: "Accused as murderer, Mexican tells judge spirits told him his allegedly murdered wife was not dead." This box got top-head play and fitted into the report as cable stuff.

Such foreign UBT's (Unusual But Trues) are in constant demand. All of them are certainly unusual, but it would require a faith that moves mountains to believe that they are all true. A typical UBT, which originated in the purloins of Constantinople, described an alleged hundred-and-fifty-year-old Turkish patriarch named Zaro as rebuking his son, aged ninety-seven, for being too lazy to work. It is difficult to believe that the originator of this yarn took it seriously; but it was hotly claimed as a beat by two competing news agencies.

III

Nothing is funnier than reading *Logs* covering the same period, but issued by two rival agencies. They suggest nothing so much as communiques issued by the opposing GHQ's in the course of the late war. The opposition beats are disparaged or slurred whenever possible, and the lie direct or indirect is occasionally passed. I recall the following extracts from the *Log* of an organization which was working in vigorous competition with the Amalgamated News:

Amalgamated News put out an alleged exclusive story from Rome, which, like many of their other exclusives, impresses us as just a little too exclusive to be true. . . . Amalgamated claimed a forty-five minute beat on us on Corson swimming the Channel. This was just fifteen minutes more than they had, and they furthermore forget that they were about an hour behind on the last attempt to swim the Channel. You have to be on your toes every minute to meet competition of this kind.

But the enterprising foreign correspondent is supposed to inspire news as well as to record it. Fortunately, not a great deal of imagination would be required to in-

vent the type of story outlined in the following suggestion:

Any of the mistresses of the ex-Shah of Persia would be good for a bit of publicity if they'd talk *re* him as the ideal lover, or the happy exiled monarch glad to be free from the chains of office, or some such chatter.

Sex is a "breakfast, dinner and supper subject in America," according to one of the Amalgamated News *Logs*; and anything dealing with this fascinating subject in lively style is certain to receive a warm welcome. A plea for "anything sensational or shocking in the texts or the nudities in opera, drama or operetta" is voiced in another *Log*.

The political interests of *Homo americanus* are rather feebly developed, if one is to judge from the constant pleas for more concentration on HI (*i.e.*, human interest) subjects. They seem to run only to fights and dictatorships. "If you have a dictator in your bailiwick, send him along," says one *Log*. On another occasion the cable editor recalls sadly that the Geneva correspondent missed the story (probably imaginary) about a violent personal quarrel between Sir Austen Chamberlain and the Swedish Foreign Minister, M. Unden, during the session of the League of Nations in March, 1926. "I'd have traded everything we got for that quarrel," is his mournful conclusion.

The following list of stories, chosen for special commendation in various *Logs*, gives a pretty good view of what the average editor in Kankakee or Fort Wayne (or in New York, for that matter) wants in the way of foreign news:

August 24—Fine London mailer, "Parrot in Zoo Commits Suicide," well liked by New York City papers.

April 5—Dash contributed what those who read

it pronounced the best Easter feature to appear here. The story recounted the peculiar Mexican custom of hanging effigies of Judas, sometimes loaded in the seat of the pants with firecrackers, on the Saturday before Easter.

August 24—We missed the story of the Queen of Rumania bobbing her hair, which went across for big play in New York.

May 25—Among the outstanding stories from the mail bag were "Sargent From The Spirit World Demands Jazz"; "Younger Set in Berlin Demands Petting Parties in Taxis"; "Dancing Masters in Paris Vote Down the Charleston."

August 10—Two stories of the type always demanding reasonable Amalgamated News coverage broke in Europe during the past week. One was "Y. M. C. A. meeting at Helsingfors votes that much of its week's deliberations must be devoted to sex as the most urgent of human problems." The other is the Oxford meeting of the British Association for Advancement of Science, which is still going on. We have had such interesting bits as "Scientists explode the sheik theory", "Indian scientist demonstrates that flowers breathe and breed" and "Scientists show why bald-headed men have more brain-power."

January 25—(Special Request to Buenos Aires Bureau): Give us more stories like girl suiciding because her lover called her a hippopotamus.

January 25—The second coming of Christ through Krishnamurti is a sock. [*i.e.*, a blow to the opposition agencies].

June 9—Moscow's prehistoric brain discovered: here was a feature that was much appreciated.

From all this it seems reasonably clear that a knowledge of history, foreign languages, political science and economics is rather superfluous baggage for an American foreign correspondent. He appears to be prized pretty much in proportion as he possesses the qualifications of a vaudeville showman. Let him turn out a good snappy standardized line of stories about parrots who commit suicide and gentlemen who want jazz played at their funerals, and he need not worry about the political, economic and cultural problems of the country where he serves. One thing he must remember. It is embalmed in the terse, compelling message: "Think stuff unwanted."

SANTA FÉ SKETCHES

BY CARL SANDBURG

The valley was swept with a blue broom to the west.

And to the west, on the fringes of a mesa sunset,
there are blue broom leavings, hangover blue wisps—
bluer than the blue floor the broom touched
before and after it caught the blue sweepings.

The valley was swept with a blue broom to the west.

2

When a city picks a valley—and a valley picks a city—
it is a marriage—and there are children.

Since the bluebirds come by twenties
and the blackbirds come by forties
in March, when the snow skirls in a sunshine wind;
since they come up the valley to the city, heading north,
it is taken as a testimony of witnesses.

When the bluebird barriers drop,
when the redwing bars go down,
the flurries of sun flash now on the tail feathers—
it is up the valley—up and on—
by twenties and forties—
and the tail feathers flashing.

In the cuts of the red dirt arroyos,
at the change of the mist of the mountain waterfalls,
in cedars and piñons, at the scars and gashes,
at the patches where new corn will be planted,
at the Little Canyon of the Beans,
they stop and count how far they have come,
the twenties and forties stop and count.

Whoever expected them to remember,
to carry little pencils between their toes,
notebooks under their wings?
By twenties, by forties—it is enough;
“When wings come, and sun, and a new wind