

# *Communications — More Than Just Reporting*

J. CLAYTON HERMAN

BY LISTENING to your audience, a journalist can be more than a reporter. You can also be a communicator—and time may show you to have been a problem solver. Here's evidence:

Concern about pollution and the environment ushered in the 1970s. Teach-ins and sit-ins to discuss these concerns were popular on many college campuses. And many words about these topics have been printed and spoken.

As an extension departmental editor serving both agronomy and agricultural engineering, I was aroused enough to attend a series of some 20 teach-in lectures and forums about the environment.

In one session about water quality, the director of the Ames, Iowa, sewage treatment plant discussed the local situation. I became curious enough to phone this speaker the next day for more information about the chemical analysis of the waste sludge from the treatment plant.

He said that the sludge contains three per cent nitrogen plus other plant nutrients. Home gardeners are encouraged to cart away the dried sludge for a soil conditioner.

Ames population is growing, however, and the portion of gardeners is becoming smaller. Thus, the sludge pile gets bigger each year. A plant employee later told me, "We wear the stuff out moving it."

Realizing that farmers spend millions of dollars each year for commercial fertilizers containing the same plant nutrients that are in the sludge, I wondered about the possibility of using the Ames sewage sludge for corn production.

I suggested to the sewage plant director that a soil test would

reveal the nutrients needed for corn production. A chemical analysis of the sludge would show what plant foods were contained in the sludge. By simple arithmetic, a person could determine how many pounds or gallons of sludge to apply on X acres of corn land. Any shortages of specific plant nutrients could be made up by applying inorganic fertilizers.

The plant director replied, "We are interested in using the sludge in crop production, and have done some work in spreading it on cropland. But we would like to know more about how much to apply."

"You have my blessing for initiating such a research project," he continued. "We have a 2,000-gallon tank truck and we own some land near the plant. We will spread any amount of sludge on this land any place you want it. The land is cash rented to a tenant. If the tenant is damaged or inconvenienced in any way, we will pay him damages."

I was pretty flattered by that offer.

Knowing that the ag experiment station has several talented researchers that could do something about the city's problem of sewage waste disposal, I phoned the head of the agronomy department.

He informed me of their squeeze on funds, their shortage of land for conducting experiments, and several other problems. But I kept the conversation going until he heard what the sewage plant director was offering.

He, too, became interested and suggested a couple of research agronomists that might be interested in the research proposition.

Next, I called one of the agronomists he suggested. This man had presented some of the environmental teach-in lectures and was sympathetic to my cause. "Yes, I am interested in learning more about the use of sludge in crop production," was his reaction. "And I will be glad to work with you—but I've got so dad-gum many other things going right now . . ."

However, I persuaded him to go down to the sewage treatment plant with me to see what had to be dealt with. The agronomist, Dr. John Hanway, quickly concluded that a demonstration on this land would be meaningless because of the high fertility resulting from previous applications of sludge. Also, a demonstration this year would be ruled out unless suitable land on another farm could be obtained.

Determined not to see my project punctured so easily, I reasoned that the researcher and the plant director must meet face-to-face to discuss constructive research alternatives.

So I made appointments to bring the two together, and went along to hear what happened.

Some quick figuring between the agronomist and the plant director indicated that at least 10 acres of land would be needed for spreading approximately one year's production of sludge. This acreage was based on the nitrogen content of the sludge, and further research would be needed to determine the reaction of the soil and the plants to be grown.

This conversation led the plant director to two suggestions:

1. A thorough literature search about the topic to prevent duplication of other researcher's mistakes.

2. The director offered to underwrite a research project in cooperation with the agronomy department to study the feasibility of using Ames sewage waste for crop production.

Thus, the efforts of a journalist interested enough in the total ramifications of a problem can result in a solution of a waste disposal problem that has been brought to attention by other journalists.

I could have published a story about the situation in the local newspaper. This might have informed a number of people about the problem, but it probably would not have solved the problem.

With patience and persistence, I became a negotiator. Through this effort two institutions were able to communicate with each other. My efforts became the communications system that allowed them to communicate.

My concluding challenge is for fellow AAACE members to widen their visions of what they can be and do.

Ag college journalists traditionally have been "brokers" of technical information between the information producers (research and extension) and the information consumers (farmers, housewives, etc.). In an increasingly inter-related world, there can be a significant role for technical journalists as "brokers" who bring problems and resource people together. This latter role requires that the journalist know his audience, his audience's problems, and his audience's perspective of those problems.