

## SLUDGE, BIOSOLIDS, AND THE PROPAGANDA MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

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### ABSTRACT

The Water Environment Federation's elaborate effort to rename sewage sludge as "biosolids" is an example in practice of the "propaganda model" of communications, which sees its task as indoctrinating target audiences with ideas favorable to the interests of the communicators. The propaganda model assumes that members of the public are irrational and focuses therefore on symbolic and emotional aspects of communication. This approach to communicating arouses public resentment rather than trust. In place of a "propaganda model," public officials should adopt a "democratic model," which assumes that audiences are rational and intellectually capable of meaningful participation in decision-making.

I work with John Stauber at an organization based in Madison, Wisconsin called the Center for Media and Democracy. We specialize in exposing manipulative and deceptive practices of the public relations industry, and we've written several books on the topic, the first of which was titled *Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*. At the time we started working on *Toxic Sludge*, we actually had no idea that we would end up writing about sludge itself. It was really not on our minds at all. In fact, the way we got into writing about sludge still has us shaking our heads in amazement and some amusement. *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You* began as a book about public relations manipulations, and our title was originally taken from a satirical political cartoon by an artist who goes by the nom de plume of "Tom Tomorrow." His cartoon, which we reprint in the book, is titled "How the News Works." It depicts a businessman telling his public relations counselor, "People are upset at us because we've been dumping toxic sludge into the water supply." The PR guy

replies, “Well, by the time we’re through, they’ll thank you for it.” He starts to plant op-ed pieces in newspapers, and one of his expert spokesmen appears on television, holding up a glass with water with all kinds of awful stuff in it. “And so you see,” the expert says as he holds up the glass, “toxic sludge is actually quite good for you.”

As we were casting about for titles for our book, we were struck by that phrase. We thought it was catchy, and we actually went into a bookstore to test it on people, most of whom thought it was amusing, so that’s what we named the book. We never had any intention of writing about sludge itself, actually, until we got a phone call from Nancy Blatt, who works for the Water Environment Federation (WEF). She had heard about the title of the book we were writing, and she wanted us to change it to something else, such as “Smoking Is Good for You.” She went on to tell John that the WEF, which represents sewage treatment plants in the United States, doesn’t call it “sludge” anymore. “We call it biosolids,” she said, “and we’re engaged in a campaign to win public acceptance for the beneficial use of biosolids.” Then she said something further that *really* got our attention. She added, “We were concerned because we thought you might have heard something negative about the campaign being planned by Powell Tate, our PR firm.”

This is one of the things that still has John and me shaking our heads. It’s really quite amazing. Here we were, two writers who specialize in writing about public relations from a very critical, almost completely negative point of view, and someone who considers herself a public relations professional actually gets the bright idea of calling us up to say, “we don’t call it sludge anymore, and by the way, we thought you might have heard something negative about our PR firm.” Talk about waving a red flag in front of a bull! To this day I wonder how she managed to keep her job after she did this.

Naturally, we started to inquire, and after answering our initial query, Nancy Blatt very quickly stopped cooperating. We actually had to do a fair amount of digging to uncover the details of this PR campaign, whose stated goal was to make “the beneficial use of biosolids non-controversial by the year 2000.” One of the things we came across was a “Name Change Task Force” that was set up in 1990 for the purpose of coining a new term to replace “sludge,” in hope of escaping its negative connotations. Operators of sewage treatment plants actually participated in a national contest to come up with a new name for sludge. Evidently many of them have a sense of humor, because some of the names they came up with along the way were pretty funny: “biolife,” “bioslurp,” “black gold,” “skadoo,” “humanure,” “the end product,” “recyclite,” “nutricake,” and “R.O.S.E.” (my personal favorite), which is an acronym for “Recycling of Solids Environmentally.” Perhaps it’s some reflection on the nature of bureaucracy that out of all of these inspired bits of whimsy, the WEF chose one of the most boring terms it could find—“biosolids,” a word that seems to have been chosen precisely because it evokes absolutely nothing in the minds of people who hear it. According to Rutgers University professor William Lutz,

the former editor of the *Doublespeak Quarterly Review*, the term biosolids has “one great virtue. You think of biosolids and your mind goes blank.”

Things didn’t end there. Once WEF had coined the new term, the next step was to lobby Merriam Webster to get the word “biosolids” added to the dictionary. I spoke with Mike Roundy, who is a science editor at Merriam Webster. He told me that the campaign there began in the early 1990s when he was contacted by Peter Machno, who manages Seattle’s sludge-to-fertilizer program. Machno asked what it would take to get “biosolids” added to the dictionary, and the people at Merriam Webster explained that you have to do more than simply invent a new word. “Our entries are not based on the mere *existence* of a word,” Roundy said. “They’re based on common usage. Until we see evidence of usage in magazines and books, it’s not going to be entered.” So people like Machno began to do just that. They began a systematic effort to plant usages of the term “biosolids” in as many places as possible, precisely so that the word could qualify for inclusion. They also lobbied hard to make sure that the dictionary entry for “biosolids” would avoid any reference to sludge. “It looks like we are making progress on getting it included in a new edition,” Machno wrote in an April 15, 1994 memo. “I am pleased that the term ‘sludge’ will not appear in the definition of biosolids,” he predicted confidently. “In the wastewater industry, it is not ‘politically correct’ to use the term sludge any longer.”

We came across another memo, written in 1995 by John Walker, an attorney with the EPA, who wrote that he was “most dismayed” by the discovery that WEF was about to publish a manual of operating procedures for “sludge stabilization.” He complained that this use of the word “sludge” ran contrary to WEF and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) policy, which “endorses the use of the word ‘biosolids’ and words like ‘solids’ or ‘wastewater residuals’ in lieu of the word sludge. I find it almost inconceivable that WEF would print an official guide using the word sludge after having worked so hard to establish a beneficial use policy that at its very heart recognized the importance of careful communication with the use of appropriate wording like biosolids.” What we have here, in other words, is not just a new euphemism for sludge, but also a real effort, written up as policy, to avoid the use of the word sludge entirely.

This sort of campaign is easy to parody, of course, which is what we did in our book. After *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You* was published and we began hearing feedback from readers, we noticed that people have widely negative attitudes to this use of word coinages in an attempt to change public perception. There’s something Orwellian about it. In fact, I’ve gone back and reread George Orwell’s novel, *1984*, which describes a fictional world in which masters of thought control are rewriting the dictionary. In Orwell’s book, words that might enable people to think undesirable thoughts are eliminated and replaced with new vocabulary, often consisting of “two or more words, or portions of words, welded together. . . . The usual care was taken to define them carefully and strip them of undesirable meanings.” This description bears an uncanny resemblance to

what the EPA and the WEF have tried to do with “biosolids,” right down to the part about taking “two or more words or portions of words” and “welding them together.”

Our book has been criticized, of course, from people involved in marketing “biosolids.” One of their complaints is that we’ve gone out of our way to make a big deal about what they regard as an innocuous little effort to come up with a nicer-sounding name for sludge. Actually, though, I think the WEF and the EPA are the ones who have made a big deal out of this. They expended quite an extraordinary effort just to invent and propagate a euphemism. It’s worth asking *why* changing the name of sludge is such a big deal for them, and I think asking that question takes us into aspects of what I like to refer to as the “propaganda model of communication” that works in modern society.

When I say “propaganda model,” I’m talking about an approach to communicating that you find quite often in certain bureaucratic and scientific circles, in which the problem of how to communicate with the public turns into a preoccupation with the symbolic and emotional aspects of communication. I call this a propaganda model of communication because it conceives of communication as a process involving a “communicator” who has an important message to convey, and a “target audience” that must be “educated” to accept the truth of the communicator’s message. Scholars who study propaganda have sometimes characterized this model of communication as a “hypodermic approach” in which the communicator is trying to inject his or her ideas into the mind of the audience. You can contrast this model with a dialogical approach to communication which I like to term the “democratic model.” Under the assumptions of the democratic model, you don’t have a single, privileged party trying to indoctrinate a target audience. Instead, you have conversations and negotiations involving multiple parties who are recognized as equally important and working towards some sort of negotiated settlement. The democratic model doesn’t separate “communicator” from “audience.” Everyone is a communicator, and everyone is part of the audience. Moreover, it assumes that everyone in the group is presumed to be a rational adult whose opinions have value. By contrast, the propaganda model is typically accompanied by the opposite assumption: namely, that the audience is either intellectually incapable of meaningful participation in decision-making, or else its opinions simply don’t matter except as obstacles to be overcome. (For a really extreme example of the propaganda model in action, think about the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center, where clearly there was no attempt to take the desires of the target audience into account. The goal simply was to force a certain emotion upon people; namely, fear.)

Frequently, the assumption in the propaganda model of communication is that there is an irrational component to the target audience, which is why the “communicator” needs to resort to symbolism and euphemisms to get his message across. We found this assumption about the public expressed very candidly in a 1981 public relations strategy document developed by the EPA.

The document is titled “Institutional Constraints and Public Acceptance Barriers to Utilization of Municipal Wastewater and Sludge for Land Reclamation and Biomass Production.” It contains a very striking passage which states, “The major public acceptance barrier which surfaced in all the case studies is the widely-held perception of sewage sludge as malodorous, disease causing or otherwise repulsive. . . . There is an irrational component to public attitudes about sludge which means that public education will not be entirely successful.”

The word “irrational” figures prominently here, and what’s striking to me is this absurd notion that people are irrational because they think sewage sludge smells bad. If you look at the objections that people raise to sludge, they include health concerns related to pathogens and toxins, but the most common objection involves the smell. I don’t think that’s an unreasonable, “irrational” objection. I know of a wedding that was ruined because the chapel was located near a sewage treatment plant, and members of the church ended up fleeing the scene with their mouths covered to hold back the stench. They weren’t imagining things. And yet, here in this stuffy EPA document whose very title is classic bureaucratese, we see someone blandly putting forth the notion that the public must be irrational if it thinks sludge stinks.

Of course, this way of perceiving the public is not restricted to people who discuss sewage sludge. John and I explore a number of other examples of this attitude in our latest book, titled *Trust Us, We’re Experts*. For example, there’s an adjunct to the meat industry called the rendering industry, which is responsible for disposing of waste animal parts left over from slaughter. They render the remains into oils, protein supplements, pet foods, and other products by grinding everything up and cooking it in huge vats. As you can imagine, this is a very smelly process, and they get a lot of odor complaints. One of the rendering industry’s consultants went so far as to coin the phrase, “hypermotivated complainant” (HMC for short) as a way of characterizing the people who make these complaints. He went on explain that HMCs suffer from a form of “Parkinsonian madness,” which I think is really striking because Parkinson’s Disease is not even a dementia. Michael J. Fox has Parkinson’s disease. His hands shake, but his mind is perfectly lucid. Apparently the standards necessary to become an industry consultant are not terribly high. The rendering industry has also developed a device they call a “scentometer” that consists of two tubes. They would stick a tube in each nostril and use one tube to smell the air from their rendering plant, while the other is connected to filtered, theoretically odor-free air. By comparing the difference, they thought they could “scientifically” test whether odors were coming from their rendering plant. I don’t think it takes someone from the school of medicine to tell you that this is not a very scientific method of gauging odors, but it helped reinforce their notion that the people who were complaining were merely crazy people with some kind of Parkinsonian madness.

I could add other, similar examples of similar notions coming from other self-proclaimed experts in other fields. Industries and governments in conflict

with public opinion often have this tendency to discount the actual complaints and objections of people who are unhappy with what is being done in their neighborhood. There's a tendency to dismiss complainants as "NIMBYs"—"not in my backyard" naysayers. If someone in the neighborhood objects to an odor or a health problem, the objection is dismissed as "anecdotal" or "emotional" in comparison with the "rational, scientific data" produced by devices such as the scentometer. The public's concerns are waved away, while scientists and bureaucrats in the employ of the industry are held up as being rational, reasonable, and in every way more Spock-like than the people that they are trying to influence.

The paradoxical thing about this approach to communicating with the public is that it actually does more to arouse public concern than to allay it, because people pick up very quickly on the fact that these assumptions are being made about them. In *Trust Us, We're Experts*, we quote from an email that we received from Tamara Rich, a woman who lives in Ridgetop, Tennessee. "My child is currently enrolled in Watauga Elementary School," she wrote. "Both his school and our home are approximately 1,000 yards from a sludge dump called 'Show Me Farms.' Although the experts will tell you there is no danger, they will also tell you there is no smell. For the past year, more often than not, people gag when they walk out the door. Our school has not been able to open windows or let the children play outside on most days. Of course, my house is now on the market, with little to no hope of selling. Ridgetop citizens seem to be having a high level of strokes, defined as due to unknown toxins by Vanderbilt Hospital. There's also been a lung malfunction for one child that was also labeled by Vanderbilt as unknown toxins." I've never been to Tennessee myself, and I don't know whether the health problems that Tamara Rich describes were caused by sewage sludge. What I *can* say with certainty is that she would have to be out of her mind to believe expert reassurances when they come from people who can't even bring themselves to admit that there's an odor problem.

Is the public really irrational about sludge? Is it, in fact, impossible to have candid, factual conversations with the public about it? Was the EPA correct when it stated that there is an "irrational component to public attitudes about sludge?" Based on my experience, I don't think public attitudes about sludge are any less rational than public attitudes about anything else. In writing our books, and in subsequent conversations with readers, John and I have discovered that people actually love to talk about "poop." They joke about it all the time, and we joked about it ourselves in our chapter on the subject in *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You*. We made all sorts of little "ca-ca" jokes, beginning with the chapter title, "The Sludge Hits the Fan." Far from being something that people are averse to discussing, we've found that this topic is one of the most popular things we've written. People aren't "irrational" in their dealings with sludge. In fact, every person alive has extensive, more or less daily experience with the "poop" component of sludge.

The notion that the critics of land-farming of sewage sludge are driven by irrational concerns doesn't hold up when you look at the way the critics actually talk about the issue. When the proponents of land application talk among themselves about their critics, they have a tendency to misrepresent the actual stated positions of sludge opponents. Most of the people I've seen raise criticisms are not objecting to the "poop." They're talking about the cadmium, the lead, the dioxin, the pathogens. Those are the concerns that are foremost in their minds. It's not "humanure" that is raising the objections, it's the other stuff. The EPA's argument is predicated on the notion that public objections are rooted in some sort of deep-seated phobia related to human excreta. This is really a ridiculous notion, based on the same sort of dime-store Freudianism that enabled a study group of the Atomic Energy Commission in 1958 to declare that public concern regarding "atomic waste disposal" as fallout "derives from a symbolic association between atomic waste and body waste." The really paradoxical thing about this sort of analysis is that rather than helping the analyst understand his audience, it actually serves as a convenient way of *ignoring* what the audience is actually saying.

I am not a scientist, and it's not my place to answer the scientific questions about sludge and whether it is appropriate for use in various contexts. What I *can* contribute is the observation that effective communications in a democracy need to be based on a dialogical approach rather than a propaganda model which mischaracterizes the nature of opponents' arguments so that they can be dismissed as irrational. The propaganda model, in practice, leads to people talking past each other instead of engaging in real communication. The dialogical, democratic approach is really much more effective. If you begin with the assumption that all parties involved are rational adults, you're much more capable of focusing on what people are actually saying. That's how real communication has to begin, instead of resorting to obfuscating euphemisms and various rationalizations that attempt to psychoanalyze the motives of people with opposing views.

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