

JOHN SWEENEY, speaking at League Day in Dover, March 21, 2012

John Sweeney, Editorial Page Editor of the *Wilmington News Journal*, gave the media perspective of “Disclosure in Delaware: Follow the Money!” He began his talk with an anecdote about an experience he had while he was working at the *Bucks County Courier Times* in Northampton Township. He said that as he began his job at the newspaper that the “old guard” in the leadership of this well-to-do township were being challenged by the “young turks.” The old guard wanted to sell off their land in the rural areas to developers, while the young turks had bought land in those areas and didn’t want anyone else to move in. The young turks won control of the township government, and then closed their meetings.

The difference between a problem and a predicament is that a problem is something that has a solution, while a predicament is something that if you fix you’ll just get another problem.

It has been Sweeney’s observation that newly elected officials come into office wanting to get certain things done, but they find that they don’t have control over the bureaucracy, so they can’t get the things done. Sweeney concludes that you can’t legislate human nature. A lot of offices, he says have their authority horizontally. Our biggest problem is to understand that.

Proper reporting demands a shared vocabulary, Sweeney says. For example, what is a lobbyist, and what is an environmentalist? The shared vocabulary must include a sense of externalities in the case of many environmental issues. We all have to agree on the parameters of issues through an accurate sense of what those issues really are. He says that our communication problem is exacerbated by the internet. You can find endless amounts of information on the internet, but it’s all presented through a filter, so you don’t get both sides of the story.

One time when he was a public editor a man called in and complained about the newspaper’s coverage of a gay and lesbian union meeting. He said that it was immoral to report such things. Within a half hour a U.D. professor phoned in and complained about a Cal Thomas piece which opposed gay marriage. The professor thought it was reprehensible that the paper would print such a hateful message.

Sweeney quoted George Orwell’s pithy statement: “The greatest duty of man today is to speak clearly.”

In response to a question from the widow of a journalist about rules for journalists, Sweeney responded that the *News Journal* has a clear ethics policy. Writers must report all outside income, and they can receive no outside gifts....no flowers, no treats for the break room, and they can’t even accept book gifts. It’s okay for them to accept cups of coffee, however.

Submitted by Peggy Schultz