

2013's top legal journalists selected

Webber Wentzel announced the winners of the fifteenth annual Legal Journalist of the Year Awards that recognise outstanding work in the field of legal journalism. The winners of three categories - print, television and radio - each walked away with R50,000.

Tony Beamish won the print category, SABC journalist, Adel van Niekerk, was the winner of the television category and the winner of the radio category was Paul McNally. This year's competition attracted a record number of entries.

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Press ombudsman, Joe Thlooe, presented the awards while Times Media Group editor-in-chief, Mondli Makhanya, was the guest speaker.

Webber Wentzel senior partner David Lancaster says, "The awards are designed to recognise the role journalists play in promoting knowledge of our judiciary and understanding of our civil and criminal justice systems."

Corruption in garnishee orders

Beamish won for 'Fraud at court: another spoke in the garnishee wheel', which was published by Moneyweb and exposed corruption in the granting and administration of garnishee orders.

The judges noted that he went beyond standard reporting on this topic by "speaking to and securing affidavits from people against whom garnishee orders were obtained; by meticulously checking the accuracy of their claims; and by using legal processes - including the Promotion of Access to Information Act - to gain access to evidence that uncovered fraud at a particular magistrate's court where such orders are granted."

They said that the article was, "told in a lively and provocative manner" and described the approach as, "a form of advocacy journalism that deals with a widespread problem that, so it is argued, contributed to the volatility of the situation at Marikana in the days before the Marikana massacre."

Investigating Mdluli

Mandy Weiner received a commendation for her two-part story titled 'Where there's smoke, there are mirrors: #SAs most complicated story you should care about', which was published on the Daily Maverick website. The piece investigating suspended Crime Intelligence head Richard Mdluli and the National Prosecuting Authority's attempts to dismiss prosecutor Glynnis Breytenbach, "goes to the heart of the credibility of South Africa's criminal justice system."

The judges commented that, "It is a complicated story with many protagonists, dealing with diverse forms of legal processes" that Wiener tells, "with precision and accuracy in a manner that remains accessible to the ordinary reader without over-simplification."

Two winning pieces, prisons and family violence

Van Niekerk submitted three pieces, two of which were seen to be 'outstanding' by the judges. Double standards' examines the handling of medical parole in South Africa's prisons, while 'Home is where the hurt is' investigates the ineffectiveness of the criminal justice system in protecting women and children. Both were aired on Special Assignment.

The first contrasts the plight of a cancer sufferer in Johannesburg's Sun City prison with the way that the Department of Correctional Services has handled several high-profile cases and questions whether double standards have been applied.

The judges pointed out that, "The report uses the medium with consummate skill, using a powerful individual case study to make an important contribution to public discussion about a major controversy in the prison system."

Referring to 'Home is where the hurt is', the judges said that "First-hand accounts, illustrated by some dramatic reconstructions of violent incidents, provide the substance of the report" and that "Viewers accompany the victims in their frustrating search for safety and justice and one striking element is the personal testimony of a man who broke the cycle of violence."

Hazel Friedman, also of the SABC, received a commendation in this category for 'Dead Cows', which highlights the plight of South Africans who are duped or coerced into being drug mules and end up in foreign jails. The two-part feature looked at gaps in the law and introduced new insights such as the fact that these people are typically decoys or 'dead cows', distracting customs officials to enable professional smugglers to slip through with larger consignments.

The judges noted her argument that drug mules should be viewed as human trafficking victims not criminals and said that the piece "is an important story told with passion and skill." They were also impressed that Friedman recorded people involved in recruiting mules and pointed out that the police had not followed up on the information.

Community radio highlights Department of Correctional Services' incapacity

McNally of the Wits Justice Project and Wits Radio Academy won for the story 'Drug withdrawal in remand detention', which was broadcast on 27 August by Thetha FM, a community radio station based in Orange Farm, south of Johannesburg.

His piece tells of the suicide of an awaiting trial heroin addict with the judges recognising his skills in using radio to "bring out the drama and gore of Charles's death and question the capacity of the Department of Correctional Services to respond to the withdrawal symptoms of addicts in its care."

The judges felt that the piece was, "a dramatic example of what can be achieved via collaboration between a community radio station and an established institution."

SABC Radio parliamentary correspondent, Mercedes Besent, received a commendation for her feature 'Prepaid water', which was aired on SAfm's Weekend AM LIVE on 31 August. The piece investigates community protests about prepaid water meters, relaying stories of families running out of water with shampoo in their hair and people walking around in the dark or during storms to reload their meters. She also uncovered numerous families ignorant of their right to 450 litres of free water daily.

The judges commented that Besent "took the frustrations of the protesters seriously and went to investigate the real reasons why so many were opposed to the system."

Lancaster concludes, "The excellent standard of entries is testament to the quality of journalism on legal issues in South Africa. The important issues uncovered in the winning stories demonstrate the valuable contribution of journalists to South Africa's legal landscape."