

# Successful undercover reporting gives hope

By [Prof Anton Harber](#)

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There is gloom about the media and our journalism, but entries into the Taco Kuiper Award, to be presented tomorrow, Friday 17 April 2009, shows that there are brave reporters, backed by serious and committed editors and producers, who are doing their best to uncover wrongdoing, and ensuring that crooks and thieves in the state, public and private sectors don't sleep easily at night.



Sitting on judging panels for journalism awards gives one valuable insight into the best of South African reporting. The Taco Kuiper Award, which gives out a whopping R200 000 for “a distinguished example of investigative journalism”, will be presented on Friday 17 April, and that has meant I have been poring through piles of material of some of the year's most important stories.

The award, which we run at Wits Journalism in partnership with the sponsor, the Valley Trust, is different in that there are not dozens of categories. There is only one award, and one runner-up, so the result is a true reflection of excellence.

Also, a team of nominators is employed to spot the best and make sure they are entered — unlike many awards in which judges can consider only those who chose to or managed to enter on time, which does not always include the best material.

Much as I would like, I cannot tell you the outcome before Friday's ceremony, but we came down to a fascinating short list. It was the first year the award was open to broadcasters. There were no entries from the SABC or e.tv — a sad reflection on these institutions. There were a few entries, however, from M-Net's *Carte Blanche*.

Also notably absent were daily newspapers, which seem not to be investing in the kind of in-depth, probing journalism recognised by this award. Last year, a daily — the *Dispatch* of East London — won, and the year before it was the Afrikaans press, in the form of *Beeld*. The *Mail & Guardian* has been a runner-up twice, and the *Sunday Tribune* once.

This year, the weeklies dominated. There were two community media entries: one from a radio station and one from a small, struggling newspaper in Barberton. The latter showed that to take on municipal corruption did not need large resources, but did depend on the courage and determination of a dedicated publisher/editor/reporter. This gives hope that this Cinderella sector is making its effect felt on the very important level of local journalism.

It was also notable that there were some very interesting exposes of the private sector. White-collar crime needs much more attention from journalists the world over. The emphasis is still on government malfeasance, but the corporate sector featured this year more than ever before, with a couple of entries from the *Financial Mail*.

The stories ranged from the mother of all scandals — the arms deal — through social investigations into issues such as abortion, and small but important stories such as that of corruption at police stations. One of the most memorable moments was footage of a policeman caught on video trying to put his bribe — in the form of a live sheep — into the boot of a police car. He failed, but did manage to get it into the back seat.

The judges felt this year that stories were being presented more effectively. Investigations are often complex and obscure and the writers and editors have to tread sensitive legal paths. But stories work best when they are given human angles, and when accompanied by effective graphics and other ways of explaining difficult things. Many entries achieved this.

There was concern, as every year, with stories that relied heavily on unnamed sources. Some judges felt that some journalists are still failing to give as much of a description of an anonymous source as possible. It is essential to give as many details of the source as one can to allow readers to judge credibility.

It became clear that any of the top five short-listed stories were potential winners. Despite the gloom about the media and our journalism, there are pockets in which brave reporters, backed by serious and committed editors and producers, are ensuring that crooks and thieves in the state, public and private sectors don't sleep easily at night.

There are many who are quick to have a go at the media when we get it wrong. Wouldn't it be nice if those same critics applaud those who got it right through blood, sweat and tears?

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