

Judges remarks for the 11th Taco Kuiper Award for Investigative Journalism

Delivered by Anton Harber, convenor of judges.

Award ceremony, 18 March 2016, at the Wits Club, Johannesburg

We gather for the 11th time to pay tribute to journalists who spend their time digging and probing – and often risking their lives for little reward – to expose wrongdoing. Investigative reporters have been derisively called “muckrakers”, but we embrace that label to say that we are proud of those who play such an important role in our society by digging around in the dirt to hold the powerful to account.

This event is a tribute, but it is also an annual opportunity to take stock of our journalism and assess the extent to which it is still playing the role of watchdog. Many of the institutions of accountability in our democracy are facing BOTH political pressure to conform and be less critical and severe financial constraints. We have to ask if the media is still able to fulfill its obligations to rake the muck. I hope our examination of the 43 entries throws some light on this.

Forty-three was a healthy number of entrants. Thirteen came from television, three from radio, two from websites, indicating that newspapers continue to play the leading role in setting the investigative agenda. I am pleased to say there were six entries from entities which had not entered before, such as Al Jazeera, Kaya FM and Daily Maverick/Chronicle.

We have two panels to assess these entries. The first, which sifted through all the entries and drew up the shortlist, consisted of:

Sarah Carter, of CBS's 60 Minutes, , **Joe Thlooe**, former editor, veteran journalist and current director of the Press Council, and **Lizeka Mda**, senior editor and now lecturer at Wits Journalism. A few entries had to be culled because some media outlets had ignored the limitation on numbers of entries, attempting to impress us with quantity rather than quality.

The second panel then focuses on the top contenders. It included **Sarah Carter** and **Lizeka Mda** again, along with former editor and highly respected political commentator **Justice Malala**, former Supreme Court of Appeal judge **Tom Cloete**, and myself, as convener.

A very big thanks to these judges for their hard work and the quality of their careful analysis of every entry.

The panel has asked me to make a few remarks on their behalf.

A number of entries were features or just news pieces rather than investigations, and we would like to emphasise that we seek to recognize work that goes beyond daily reporting, which involves investigative approaches to uncover information of public interest that would not otherwise be known. Some of the entries were hastily put together, and it makes a difference when an entry is put together with care and strong motivation. We did spend some time poking holes in stories and we passed over a number of stories which seemed incomplete. Most disturbing is when bad editing or lackluster presentation impairs the impact of the story.

Perhaps most notable was the range of stories. We always receive a bunch of entries about government corruption, but this year a number took on private sector malpractice. There was also some really unusual stories, such as taxi drivers who take babies back to Zimbabwe. Hopefully, this challenges the notion that we only tackle problems in government.

It was notable, though, that the amounts of money involved in financial scandals seems to have gone from millions to billions. If you add up the amounts of which have been the subject of investigation in this year's entries, it totals trillions of rands, literally – a sign of the escalation of not just the extent but the scale of abuse of public funds.

A disappointment was the low number and quality of television and radio entries. These are the country's biggest mediums, but only one broadcasting entry made our shortlist. We have to ask what it is in our media system that leads to a lack of good investigative journalism in these media.

In general, the feeling was that the full pool of entries did not match the quality we had seen in recent years, but when we got down to the top entries, we saw pockets of excellence. I think we can say that a number of the big issues in our society – such as expenditure on nuclear projects – are in the public eye because of the work of some excellent and dogged investigative reporters. When Pravin Gordon travels the world to convince investors that our democracy is in decent shape, one of the things he has to show is that the instruments of accountability remain sharp – and he can certainly say this of a good section of our media. But we hope to see more of this, and we hope that this award encourages it.

Now let's get down to the 11 entries which made our shortlist, all of which are examples of excellence in investigative reporting. In no particular order:

1. Rob Rose of the Financial Mail for The Credit Crunch

Rose took on Lewis Stores for dubious credit financing practices causing serious pain to ordinary South Africans. Rose showed the human effects of such practices with devastating effect. The impact was noticeable, as Lewis' share price dropped dramatically, and they were forced to admit what they implausibly called "human errors". Shortly afterwards, angry shareholders voted down their executive remuneration policy. Stories such as this have played an important role in holding to account a sector which has caused hardship to many people for many years.

2. Susan Comrie of City Press for Inside the EFF's Finances.

Comrie acquired the bank statements of the Economic Freedom Forum and other internal documents to expose the hypocrisy of a political party that purports to speak for workers but appears to exploit its own staff. The EFF claimed these were volunteers rather than staff members – a supreme irony for an organization fighting outsourcing – but went on to lose a series of CCMA hearings on their treatment of staff.

3. Diana Neille, Richard Poplak, Shaun Swingler and Sumeya Gasa of Daily Maverick/Chronicle for Casualties of Cola.

This was a state-of-the-art multimedia feature, the product of a collaboration between a new production agency, Chronicle, and

the Daily Maverick website. They investigated what lay behind a R6-bn damages claim against the giant SABMiller and their subsidiary Amalgamated Beverages Industries by 150 of their driver-owners. This scheme to promote driver-owners has often been cited as a model for enterprise development and black empowerment, but the picture that emerged from this investigation was the very opposite – what they called an extreme form of outsourcing and labour casualisation which has left many of these drivers in financial ruin. Judges noted the fine writing, the creative use of digital multimedia, the care with which they put together their entry and the fact that it was an unusual and powerful investigation of the corporate world.

4. Peter-Louis Myburgh of Rapport/City Press/ News24 for the Prasa Saga

After an anonymous tip-off, Myburgh spent four months verifying the claim that the Passenger Rail Agency of SA (Prasa) had spent R600-m on rolling stock which was too tall for our railway network. When the story, “SA R600-m train blunder”, ran, Prasa said it was “devoid of truth”. But Peter-Louis followed up with documentation that proved the case. Prasa later admitted the massive blunder and, as a result of this and other reports, the CEO Lucky Montana and the Chief Engineer, were fired. It was classic investigative work: careful, patient probing to find supporting evidence for an abuse of public moneys, backed up with solid documentation, and powerfully presented to ensure it had impact. And it certainly did.

5. The USpiked Team for Condom Rush.

This 10-person team from what calls itself a boutique media operation in Cape Town did remarkable digging and data analysis to expose gross inflation and fraud in a tender to supply condoms to the Department of Health. It started with an intern noticing discrepancies in something as mundane as supplier codes, and went on to show how blacklisted suppliers were using multiple identities to inflate products and services. The amounts involved were staggering – R1,9bn paid for lubricants which were worth a tenth of that. We had to read deep into the story to find these facts, but they were hidden gems.

6. Lionel Faul, Sam Sole and Stefaans Brummer of AmaBhungane, the Mail & Guardian investigative centre, for Nuclear Nation.

This was a collection of the newspaper's extensive work throughout the year on the big story of the country's nuclear plans. It starts with their fortuitous discovery of the controversial contract with Russia on the internet, through to showing how Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene's prudent stance on the issue contributed to his sacking at the end of the year. As we have come to expect of this team, it was detailed and thorough work that played a key role in ensuring public scrutiny of an issue of national importance.

7. Our sole broadcasting finalist is Joy Summer of Carte Blanche for Redisa.

It was a pleasure to find an examination of an unusual topic: the Department of Transport's elaborate scheme to recycle tyres. Summer had stuck with this story over years to gather the evidence to back up claims that the scheme was not working and was enriching those at the top at the expense of those at the bottom of the large-scale scheme, failing to provide the jobs and recycling which we taxpayers were paying for. Interviewer Devi Sankaree Govender provided some rich material and raised some important questions about why such a scam had the full support of the Minister of Transport.

8. Sam Sole of AmaBhungane again for The Wrecking Ball

This was also a collection of pieces done over the year, which, taken together, show a startling capture of the justice system by a presidency intent on protecting itself, its allies and patrons, even at the cost of some of the more important public institutions, such as the Hawks and the NPA. Sole draws on a wide array of confidential sources, court records and secret intelligence reports to piece together a story of huge impact on the quality and stability of our democracy.

9. Bongane Fuzile of the Daily Dispatch for Glebelands Hostel.

This hotbed of conflict in Umlazi – where more than 50 people have died violently - has featured in other entries. Fuzile showed remarkable courage and resilience to expose the political, regional and ethnic tensions behind the killings and in bringing out the cries of the many residents who just wanted peace in their homes.

He persevered when his life was threatened, and this paid off with the intervention of the Public Protector.

10. Leanne George of Beeld/Netwerk24 for Dr Pinocchio: Exposing Prasa’s chief engineer as a fraud.

This is a story of hubris. Following from the previous Prasa story, Leanne heard CEO Lucky Montana describe his head of engineering Daniel Mtimkulu as a “genius”. With admirable journalistic scepticism, she checked out his genius, only to find that he was not registered as an engineer and his claimed double-doctorate – including the one he claimed to have got when he was 15 – was a figment of his imagination. And this is not the quality one wants from someone who has to oversee a R600-m train carriage purchase. He lost his job, as did another fake doctor in Prasa and, eventually, the CEO himself.

11. Siphe Macanda of the Daily Dispatch for the Siyenza Toilet Scandal.

This Eastern Cape newspaper applauded this R631-m sanitation project when it was announced. But Macanda kept an eye on the story to monitor delivery. When the four companies who won the tender were elbowed aside for an unknown entity, the Siyenza Group, he set out to find who they were and how they managed to get in on the act. He found they were not qualified to do the job, unless being closely related to important ANC national leaders is a qualification for building toilets. He also found that their work was shoddy and inadequate. The story, “ANC family links to R631m EC deal”, led to the contract being terminated, saving

some R400-m. Interestingly, the ANC leaders named did not object to the tender fraud, nor to the Dispatch exposing it, but they went to the Press Council to complain that they had been linked to it. Fortunately, the Press Council rejected their complaint on appeal. This was classic muckraking, done powerfully and effectively.

There you have it: some of our regular stalwarts, such as the Mail & Guardian, with two in the top list, and Carte Blanche; The Daily Dispatch, also with two, is – as always – punching well above its weight; but also two non-traditional website-based operations, Daily Maverick and USpiked, and this is a welcome development.

The judges argued for many hours to bring this down to three finalists. And they are, in no particular order:

- 1. Siphe Macanda of the Daily Dispatch for the Siyenza Toilet Scandal.**
- 2. Peter-Louis Myburgh of Rapport/City Press/ News24 for the Prasa Saga**
- 3. Diana Neille, Richard Poplak, Shaun Swingler and Sumeya Gasa of Daily Maverick/Chronicle for Casualties of Cola.**

Three powerful and important pieces, two from newspapers, one a collaboration between a production house and a website. Very little to choose between them, I must say.

This year's runner up, who takes home R100 000, is:

Siphe Macanda of the Daily Dispatch for the Siyenza Toilet Scandal.

And the winner of the country's biggest journalism award of R200 000,
is:

**Peter-Louis Myburgh of Rapport/City Press/ News24 for the
Prasa Saga**

This was an exemplar of great investigative reporting. Myburgh developed a tip-off into a national story using good sources, solid documentation, guts and determination. When the story was denied, Myburgh had cleverly kept the evidence up his sleeve to force an admission that there had been a blunder of massive proportions. The story had immediate impact, in bringing change to Prasa, and long-term repercussions in ensuring that crooks and frauds are brought to book.