

ABSW Awards 2020 Report from the Panel Chairs

Martin Ince

ABSW Awards Chair

Chairing these awards left me with one overwhelming emotion: amazement at the sheer amount of talent in contemporary UK science journalism. The 265 entries, in every format from blog posts to TV programmes, included many possible winners, providing for an enjoyable but arduous experience for the judges.

The sheer scale of the awards means that running them calls for over 20 judges, all of whom worked hard for no financial reward. It's a pleasure to thank them and to praise Gerri McHugh, ABSW Executive Secretary, for a marathon of organisational effort.

Process

The judging routine that we followed sounds simple enough: a small group of the judges shortlists each category, and the whole group chooses a winner.

Reflections

In practice, this system makes a lot of work for busy people. In future years, it might be better for the second phase to be undertaken by a subset of the panel and approved by everyone.

In future years, meetings will ideally be held face-to-face with the option of remote attendance. Our all-remote 2020 meeting proved once more that the technology isn't quite there yet.

We should clarify what we mean by "general" and "specialist" entries in the massively popular features section. I have proposed to the ABSW board that anything you commonly see on a news stand should in future be in the first group: anything else, the second.

However, this reform does not alter the fact that in any field of endeavour, from science journalism to sport, the good people end up playing for the good teams. So a small number of clever individuals, working for a small number of clever outlets, crop up a lot in the shortlists. This issue is not a new one. The judges have a straightforward remit to recognise and reward the best science writing, with no mention of positive discrimination. But it could be eased by limiting the number of entries per year from any one individual.

Another possibility, at the cost of creating yet another award, would be to split out a category for less well-resourced outlets or earlier-career writers, especially for features. Our US allies at NASW have an awards category called "Science Reporting for a Local or Regional Market," which may be a precedent.

Looking to the future, it is inevitable that our awards for work published in 2020, and I fear, 2021 as well, will need to reflect Covid-19 in a creative way.

ABSW members are key providers of pandemic information to the public, and our awards will inevitably reflect this reality. But we must also reflect the fact that new science keeps emerging, on everything from exoplanets to melting icecaps. So do those delicious stories of scientific misconduct, dubious

funding decisions, unverifiable breakthroughs, and all the other tales that keep the readers, viewers and listeners paying attention to our work. Maybe we should accept that Covid-19 coverage will dominate the next phase of these awards but set up a separate awards track to ensure that other achievements are recognised too.

Ben Deighton

ABSW European representative and Chair of the European Science Journalist of the Year Award

This year there were 14 entries to the European Science Journalist of the Year Award, comprising eight winners of national science journalist competitions and six self-nominated entries.

Process

The judges were selected from previous winners and recommendations from the European Federation; they received the entries in mid-July, with a deadline to submit their top five by mid-August.

They met via video conference on 26 August to select a winner and two runners up. During the meeting, each judge spoke in turn, nominating their overall winner and runners up. Then the total votes were collated, and the winners selected. The overall winner came out a long way ahead of the runners up.

There was some discussion as to whether the runners up should be given an equal score or be ranked second and third. In the end the judges decided to rank them second and third. The three finalists were notified and asked to attend the [virtual award ceremony](#) at the European Conference of Science Journalists on 01 September.

Reflections

The award could have been improved by making the criteria clearer; there was quite a bit of discussion about how to weight the quality of the submitted articles against the wider achievements of the entrants.

The judges also felt the presentation of the entries was confusing, with entries spread across an Excel sheet and a Google Drive page.

There was also a question about translations as it was felt that those who had translated articles into English may have had an advantage over those who asked the judges to use Google Translate.