

Awards put spotlight on values in the media

 By [Anton Harber](#)

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Journalism awards provide one of the few occasions when underpaid and undervalued journalists can get positive recognition...

Journalism awards also show us which stories and which of their peers journalists most admire, giving insight into the prevailing values in our media.

Tabloid newspapers did not get much space at last week's Standard Bank Sikuville Journalism Awards. There is just one category for something oddly named "Popular Journalism", which is meant to create a corner for SA's biggest newspapers. The rest, of course, must be "unpopular".

Tabloidism, however, was triumphant. For their Story of the Year, the judges chose the Oscar Pistorius trial, more particularly "How Oscar Pistorius changed *Beeld* forever", an account of how the paper gave the story away on Twitter and online - free - rather than trying to hold it to sell newspapers. The print industry was celebrating its own decline.

The eminent line-up of judges favoured Pistorius over the Nkandla and Marikana stories. The coverage of Nelson Mandela's death did not get a look in. The Pistorius trial brought some powerful coverage of a running real-life soap opera, whereas Nkandla and Marikana represent investigative, probing, enterprise, and sometimes ground-breaking journalism. And the Pistorius stories that won were the immediate hard news reports, not those that might have looked into the tough issues of femicide, gun culture or unequal justice in our courts.

Newspaper journalist and photographer of the year went to *The Star* photographer Antoine de Ras for a picture of Pistorius weeping at his first court appearance. It was taken through a window before a court session, pushing ethical and legal boundaries.

The prizes were dominated by Media24 (particularly in all categories to do with design, graphics and multiplatform journalism) and *The Star* (which even out-tabloided the tabloids by winning the Popular Journalism category with its "Tokyo abused me" story. The *Mail & Guardian's* remarkable "Marikana: the aftermath" sneaked in for Feature Photography and the paper also won the feature-writing prize. *The Witness* walked off a surprise winner in the investigative journalism category.

Columnist of the Year Tony Weaver was not called upon to make a speech, but he broke through the clapping to dedicate his award to his dismissed editor, Alide Dasnois, and the *Cape Times* staff - a sobering moment in an otherwise celebratory event.

A horrible mash-up

It is not surprising that President Jacob Zuma wanted to shake up the government's information and communications machinery, given the difficulty he has had in getting his "We have a good story to tell" narrative heard above the cacophony of deadly strikes, rampant local protests and the Nkandla scandal. But it is a horrible mash-up.

Zuma has moved the Government Communication and Information System and Brand SA (which probably really belongs with foreign affairs) to the communications ministry, where it joins the SABC, the Independent Communications Authority of SA (Icasa) and the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA), the body that supports community media. But he recreated the old ministry of post and telecommunications (telecoms), as if one can separate telecoms from communications and house the telecoms regulator somewhere other than the telecoms ministry.

Maybe Zuma thinks he can reverse the technological convergence we have all been preparing for. If so, he has more power than we knew.

It makes little sense.

What is clear is that it is going to take renewed vigilance to protect the independence of the SABC, Icasa and the MDDA from those who want to turn them into one-party weapons in "the battle of ideas". And in charge of posts and telecommunications is the former spymaster from the very sector shown to be abusing powers of surveillance through telecoms.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote Diepsloot (Jonathan Ball, 2011), Recht Malan Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of The A-Z of South African Politics (Penguin, 1994/5), What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic (Jacana, 2010) and Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism (Jacana, 2010).

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