

Judges remarks for the 14th Taco Kuiper Award for Investigative Journalism

Delivered by Anton Harber, convener of judges

For 14 years, this award has been recognizing and encouraging watchdog journalism, but never before have we done it under such challenging circumstances. Journalists have had to adapt to reporting under conditions of social distancing, working conditions which are fundamentally hostile to a reporter's need to get out into the field and look their subjects in the eyes. And our news media institutions are under extraordinary financial pressure, with the future of some titles at stake. But we have had to learn and adapt and it is going to be fascinating to see next year what kind of investigative journalism has taken place under such adverse conditions. Certainly our colleagues in the Global Investigative Journalism Network have highlighted some very interesting recent work around the world, ranging from Rappler in the Phillipines using personal stories to highlight the 'agonising confusion' over coronavirus testing, to the New York Times using a team of 11 reporters to show how sick people were being denied tests, to Peruvian reporters showing up faulty software that was exposing patients' data. At home, we have seen the first stories highlighting questionable elements in some of the government relief measures and scrutinizing security force conduct. And we have seen ongoing investigations into scandals such as the VBS bank heist. So the signs are that the watchdogs of journalism are doing their work, keeping an eye on those responsible for managing the corona-crisis, although under tough conditions.

The virus also brought a new wave of disinformation, undermining attempts to manage the virus and its impact and so threatening lives. Never before has it been as clear how disinformation can kill. Sometimes this came from bored troublemakers sitting in their living rooms, sometimes it was a geopolitical tool

by governments trying to undermine their rivals, sometimes it seemed to be presidents undermining their own governments. But it proliferated, and good journalism – the kind that selects, edits, verifies and contextualises and acts firmly in the public interest – has never been more important, especially good investigative journalism.

In South Africa, we have disaster regulations criminalizing the spreading of deliberate disinformation. Thankfully, these regulations were tightly and narrowly defined, unlike the emergency regulations we remember from the 1980s. While we may accept that this is necessary in the crisis, we will have to be vigilant to ensure that such restrictions on free speech are not perpetuated beyond the emergency.

Another notable development was the social media targeting of journalists, and particularly woman journalists, often vicious and misogynistic. We need to call for strong action to prevent this attempt to silence journalists, at the same time as commending those who bravely continue their work despite it.

The remarks I make today are the considered and collective responses of the judges. With a rare opportunity to survey the best work of the year, this presents a chance to make what we hope are useful observations about this field.

We received 24 entries this year, a few more than last year. There is a shift in outlets and media types among the entries, reflecting significant changes and diversification in our industry. For many years, investigative journalism and these awards were dominated by three or four mainstream newspapers; now the bulk of entries appeared first online and many come from the new generation of specialist stand-alone investigative units, like amaBhungane, Oxpeckers, Viewfinder, the OCCRP, or online-only outlets, such as Daily Maverick, GroundUP, Moneyweb and Politicsweb.

This year, we had one book, and four television entries, but – again, sadly – none from radio, though we did have an audio entry for the first time – in the form of a podcast, I am pleased to say. A number of entries were multimedia, combining the power of print, video, audio and online for reach and impact. You might remember that the first time we had an online entry was only three or four years ago. Now the bulk of our entries appeared online first.

At least seven entries this year came from non-profit organisations, reflecting the increasingly valuable role being played by these structures and the philanthropists who support them. This is significant: a lot of the most interesting work is not coming from what we would call the mainstream or traditional outlets, but from this new kind of specialist non-profit unit.

Notable this year was the diversity of subject matters. As always, we had a number of exposés of corruption and state service delivery failure, but we also had entries that dealt with land, health, medical negligence, finance, the environment, local government, child abuse, police fraud, issues of justice in our courts and white collar crime.

I am proud to declare that three entries received funding from the Taco Kuiper Fund for Investigative Reporting, now renamed the Henry Nxumalo Fund. These were treated in exactly the same way as all entries.

For the sake of future entries, the judges have asked me to say that some suffered because they had clearly been put together in haste. Some were poorly edited. It is not the first time we make this plea: editors must edit. We should not be seeing entries that are painfully long, over- or poorly written and structured. This does not do justice to the work.

We go out of our way to recognise innovation, and you will see some fine examples this year, whether it in the medium, such as podcasting, or forensic techniques, such as using social media or data analysis.

As always, we must pay special tribute to three groups of people, without whom the reporters could not do their work. First, there are those who support them, as audience, funders or partners. Second, are the editors who back the reporters and encourage them to do original, groundbreaking work. But perhaps mostly importantly, there are the whistleblowers, those who risk their lives and their livelihoods to speak out against wrongdoing, often with little reward or recognition. We give them a gigantic shout out.

But we are here to reward the journalists and let's get down to that.

The first judging panel this year consisted of myself and Thabo Leshilo. We took the 25 entries down to the best 11 for the final judging panel to focus on.

The final judging panel consisted of Lizeka Mda, Tom Cloete, Thabo Leshile again, Sara Carter and myself.

A big thank you to the judges for their time and commitment, and for doing this for the first time in lockdown.

Our shortlist, in alphabetic order:

Daneel Knoetze of Viewfinder/GroundUp for Killing the Files

This new, independent investigative unit got its hands on a huge database of records from the Independent Police Investigative Unit and used sophisticated data analysis to show that the police watchdog was closing off scores of unfinished cases at the end of the year without proper investigation. It was a multimedia offering, using video to humanize the story, and it had notable

impact, in that it has already led to policy changes on how this reporting would happen in future.

Let us show you a short extract from Daneel's video

Deon Wigget, freelancer/News24 for My Story

A podcast series, in which Wigget took us along as he went back decades to investigate his own abuser, was the year's sleeper hit. Podcasting is in its infancy in this country, but Wigget's highly personalised story, relentlessly investigated and movingly told, had major impact, leading to the arrest of the alleged perpetrator. It was refreshing to see such a powerful audio entry, and it is now giving rise to a book and a second series.

Hazel Friedman of SABC and Siphos Kings of Mail & Guardian for a series of stories on land issues

Friedman, of SABC's Special Assignment programme, submitted a number of television entries dealing with the elite capture of land reform, and one of these was also done in print with Siphos Kings of the M&G. It was a fresh take on an important issue and has led to an official investigation and the charging of at least one official.

Khadija Sharife and Mark Anderson of OCCRP (Organised Crime and Corruption Project) for the State Capture Papers.

The OCCRP is known for its important work in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and it was refreshing to see them tackling a South African story. Sharif and Anderson got hold of a copy of a computer server from Trillian, a company at the centre of state capture, and gave the first detailed account of how the notorious Gupta brothers had laundered their money through a web of shell companies. They also showed how Trillian used insider information on the firing of the

Finance Minister to profit at the expense of their own clients. It was thorough and important work.

Mikah Reddy and Stefaans Brummer of amaBhungane for the EFF Rent Racket

This entry was a compendium of stories in which these two reporters exposed how the EFF uses influence over tenders to fund themselves and their party, exposing the hypocrisy of their claim to be fighting corruption. It was a complicated story, thoroughly investigated, that had impact on the way the EFF is viewed by the media and public.

Nicky Troll of Carte Blanche for JRA Falling Down

This piece was the result of work over more than a year by a journalist determined to track down the story behind the sorry state of Johannesburg's roads. She tracked down inside sources, got an audio recording of a senior official talking about his kickbacks, confronted him dramatically on camera, and uncovered deep corruption in the Johannesburg Road Agency. It was a thorough piece of work, and great to see a focus on local government.

Pauli van Wyk of Daily Maverick for the EFF and the VBS saga

Pauli's magnum opus threw open how the EFF benefited from VBS Bank, despite their attempts to deny and cover it up. There was classic investigation involved, like getting documents and inside sources – but it was imaginative forensic social media analysis that pulled the story together and broke new ground: by triangulating credit card statements with social media data, Pauli found the missing link to the EFF leadership. It must be noted Pauli has stood firm in the face of an onslaught of serious abuse and threats from EFF supporters.

Pieter-Louis Myburgh of Penguin Books for Gangster State

Every now and then, there comes along a piece of work that is so impactful and convincing that it comes to define the way the public sees someone, and that is

the case with Myburgh's deeply-researched book and its subject, senior politician Ace Magashule. It was interesting that Myburgh left his perch at the country's biggest news outlet to spend months piecing together a comprehensive expose of the background of one of the country's most powerful people. Magashule threatened to sue, but of course hasn't, and that he is still in his job says more about this country's politics than it does about the strength of this book.

Ray Joseph and Anton van Zyl of GroundUp for Gaming the Lottery

This is an investigation that started as an international cooperative project on lotteries at our African Investigative Journalism Conference. It combines data-driven investigation with on-the-ground reporting, and raises critical questions about an important national institution. It is great to see such work coming from the cooperation of a local newspaper editor and non-profit organization GroundUp. The lottery has responded with threats and bullying. But it is notable that the responsible Ministers ordered an investigation and the pursuit of criminal charges.

Ryk Van Niekerk of Moneyweb for the Picvest Property scandal.

This is a formidable body of unique work that unravels the complicated story, of what Van Niekerk describes as the country's most significant investment tragedy, involving the looting of some R4,6bn of pensioners money. Van Niekerk has done deep forensic work to uncover the looting that took place. It is bewildering that this story has failed to get more attention from the authorities. And it is another example of the subjects resorting to threats and bullying to try and scare off the journalist.

Thanduxolo Jika and Sabelo Sikiti of Mail & Guardian for How Floyd Shivambu used VBS money to buy a Range Rover.

It was interesting that we had two shortlisted entries dealing with the EFF and its use of VBS money, highlighting the role journalist have played in exposing one of

the most horrific acts of looting at the expense of poor people. This one was the first to home in on the now-notorious Range Rover that has come to symbolize the hypocrisy of so many of those who purport to speak for the poor in this country. Jika and Sikiti did important and through work.

What an extraordinary range and quality of work we have in this shortlist. All of these had the potential to win, and deserve recognition and accolades. It is a testament to the core strength of South African journalism, the dedication and commitment that produces this work under challenging conditions. The judges had a hard time separating them, but this is what we had to do.

We took this down to a short shortlist of four, then down to just two, before we decided who was the winner and runner-up from those two. I am going to take you on this journey.

When we went down to four, we were left with these, again in alphabetical order:

- 1. Daneel Knoetze of Viewfinder/GroundUp's Killing the Files**
- 2. Deon Wigget for My Story, published by News24**
- 3. Pauli van Wyk of Daily Maverick for EFF and the VBS saga**
- 4. Pieter-Louis Myburgh of Penguin Books for Gangster State**

Then down to just two, and these were:

Pauli van Wyk of Daily Maverick for EFF and the VBS saga

Pieter-Louis Myburgh of Penguin Books for Gangster State

So, one of these gets R200 000 and the other gets R100 000. Which is it?

I am going to announce the runner-up first. Let me say this. As I announce it, we are going to unmute everyone's mike, so feel free to express your appreciation for the runner up and winner.

Well, after long online-deliberation, the runner up of this year's Taco Kuiper Award for Investigative Journalism, who takes home R100 000 is:

Pauli van Wyk of Daily Maverick for EFF and the VBS saga

That, of course, means the winner of this year's award, who pockets R200 000 is;

Pieter-Louis Myburgh for his book Gangster State