

FCJ Excellence Awards 2017

Judges' Report

As the only national competition for local newspapers, the FCJ Excellence Awards is growing steadily. There has been an increase of about twenty percent in the number of entries for the 2017 Awards compared to the 2016 Awards. About 130 journalists of more than 80 local newspapers, in all nine provinces, entered this year.

The general impression of the judges is that the local newspapers are still very much alive in South Africa. They are indeed serving their communities very well.

Photography

The judges took into account that almost all of the entrants were both journalist and photographer. To cover both aspects of the story is quite difficult, but nobody was penalised for lack of trying. However, there were quite a number of entrants who submitted images that really lacked a bit of skill. As judges and also industry professionals, we highly recommend practical photographic workshops across the country throughout the year to assist our local newspaper colleagues to hone their skills and thus ultimately raise the standard of their publications.

There were a number of very good submissions, especially in the Sport section. South Africans love their sport, but the photojournalist should not just focus on the action. Sport is a wide open category and what was lacking were feature pictures about sport people, especially our para sport people. Para sport is much neglected in this country and yet it is so inspirational. Possibly something to focus on next year?

The General section had well-supported entries although the judges felt that some images lacked real creativity. Research on your subject is key to gaining knowledge and thus forming a creative idea in your mind's eye. Overall, the entrants told the story of South Africa's communities, both good and bad.

The News section was problematic as there was a lack of good *news* images.

General

In the top 10: 10. Hugo Redelinghuys, *George Herald*; 9. Etienne van Rensburg, *Vaalweekblad*; 8. Marguerite Vermeulen, *Vrystaat News*; 7. Isabel Venter, *Zoutpansberger*; 6. Devidean Moses, *Paarl Post*; 5. Elsje Vermeulen, *Vaalweekblad* and 4. Carina Roux, *TygerBurger*.

Third: Lazarus Dithagiso, *Sedibeng Ster*; second: Selogile Leshage, *Potchefstroom Herald* and first: Zita Goldswain, *Witbank News*.

Citation: Zita's entry, *Ma se Kind*, about a home that was about to close its doors and thus deprive vulnerable small children of a place to live, was exceptional – a laughing little child on the lap of its foster mother, oblivious of the hardship.

News

In the top 7: 7. Samantha Traill, *Witbank News*; 6. Ronald Sibiyi, *Pretoria Rekord*; 5. Isabel Venter, *Zoutpansberger* and 4. Zita Goldswain, *Witbank News*.

Third: Elsje Vermeulen, *Vaalweekblad*; second: Zita Goldswain, *Witbank News* and first: Jannie du Plessis, *Vaalweekblad*.

Citation: Jannie's entry, *The police killed our brother*, was undoubtedly a worthy winner. Without showing the body of a Nigerian national, lying dead on the bonnet of a police vehicle, Jannie captured the raw emotion of the bystanders and family with a lone police officer.

Sport

In the top 10: 10. Herman Steyn, *Die Pos*; 9. Wouter Pienaar, *Potchefstroom Herald*; 8. Zita Goldswain, *Witbank News*; 7. Joe Dreyer, *Far North Bulletin*; 6. Isabel Venter, *Zoutpansberger*; 5. Hugo Redelinghuys, *George Herald* and 4. Carina Roux, *TygerBurger*.

Third: Ronald Sibiya, *Pretoria Rekord*; second: Stefan de Villiers, *Lowvelder/Nelspruit Post* and first: Ettienne van Rensburg, *Vaalweekblad*.

Citation: There was no doubt after looking at all the images submitted, that Ettienne's *Half and Half* was the winner in this section. A unique moment captured forever of the swimmer gliding through the water at the Sasol Winter Swimming Championships. The photo position chosen by Ettienne also indicates that he planned his picture long before he arrived at the pool.

Photographer of the Year

In the top 5: 5. Zita Goldswain, *Witbank News* and 4. Ronald Sibiya, *Pretoria Rekord*.

Third: Isabel Venter, *Zoutpansberger*; second: Ettienne van Rensburg, *Vaalweekblad* and first: Elsje Vermeulen, *Vaalweekblad*.

Citation: Elsje's portfolio contained all the aspects of a well-balanced and versatile photographer. The judges spent a long time deliberating and pondering over the submissions, but it was Elsje's that stood out in the end. It is not easy to be an all-rounder (to capture sport, news and feature pictures), yet Elsje has been able to do just that.

Writing

Digital reporting

The limited number of entries received and the nature of the material submitted created an impression that local and community print media generally do not yet see the need and value of reaching and interacting with their audiences on online platforms.

It appears as if reporters are not guided and briefed to give proper multiplatform treatment to their stories, that print deadlines and editions determine the online and social media flow of information, and that the online offerings often do not get proper editorial priority and care – for instance, problems with captions and just general copy subbing.

There were also few signs in the entries of integrating and optimising live and other social media reporting into the online stories published later on.

First: Jana Boshoff, *Middelburg Observer*.

Citation: Jana's work shows how nifty online and social media reportage can elevate stories from reaching only a limited local (print) audience to making national headlines and resulting in international exposure for the story and the reporter. For instance, in covering the 'coffin case trial' Jana ably demonstrated how to use various forms of social media, multimedia and online tools and techniques to tell the unfolding story in accessible ways. She is a worthy second-time-in-a-row winner in this section.

Headlines

The rules and criteria for this section were changed slightly this year. Journalists were requested to enter ten, and not only five, headlines and the emphasis was on 'creative and impactful' headlines and not just 'clever or humorous'. Although this section attracted more entries than in the past the majority still reflected only the latter type of headline.

There should be a balance between trying to be clever and sticking to the essence of the story. Journalists should be careful because wordplay can backfire. Ethics and good taste should be paramount.

Sensitive issues should be handled with care. For example, the judges found the headline 'New hospital anxious to tackle depression' to be in poor taste.

Longer headlines (but not too long) work well – the meaning is clear immediately. And there is much to say for the traditional 'use a verb in a headline'. It works better nine times out of ten.

In general, the judges felt there was an improvement in this section. (Remember, last year no first prize was awarded.)

In the top eight: Johnny Masilela, *The Beat*; Madré Marais, *Kalahari Bulletin*; Pieter Delpont, *Bloemfontein Courant*; Roelien Vorster, *Roodepoort Northsider*, and Wouter Pienaar, *Potchefstroom Herald*.

Third: Ettienne van Rensburg, *Vaalweekblad*; second: Hedda Mittner, *The Village News*; and first: Keina Swart, *Die Pos*.

Citation: Keina's headlines were original, catchy and clear. She understands how to play with words. Some of her headlines: O 'Deere' (about a tractor involved in an accident), 'Groentetuin' met skop (about dagga found during a police raid) and Ho! (bene hou!) (about a postponed marathon).

Editorial Comment

The entries varied from traditional, formal comment to a more relaxed, informal style. A column written by an editor is not necessarily 'editorial comment'.

Strong local issues were addressed, noticeably crime and service delivery. However, many needed stronger *positioning* on these issues.

Some comments were too long – too much rambling, taking too long to get to the point. Some only stated the obvious. Others lost their viewpoints in endless groaning and moaning.

Some Afrikaans writers used too many English quotes in their pieces; it was just lazy writing.

In the top seven: Danie Keet, *Eikestadnuus*; Hennie Stander, *Potchefstroom Herald*; Lise Beyers, *Paarl Post*; and Tasmin Cupido, *District Mail*.

Third: Tobie van den Bergh, *Middelburg Observer*; second: Lerato Serero, *Sedibeng Ster*; and first: Marlene Jordaan, *Worcester Standard*.

Citation: Marlene's comments were pithy to the point. The headlines say it all: 'Leer waterles by Vrystaters', 'Rugbygeweld is 'n skande', 'Gemeenskap treur saam', 'Besin oor jou eie optrede' and 'Pasop wat jy op web plaas'.

Columns

The judges really enjoyed reading through these entries. There was a wide variety of stories and styles.

The focus remains on local and what would be of interest to readers. It is a fine balance between personal stories – with all the *I*'s or *me*'s – and how they relate to the readers' interests. It should not just be moralizing or a first person narrative about issues that upset the author.

Some columns were too long and then still did not have much to say...

Columnists should pay special attention to grammar. Surely columns are showpieces of the newspapers' best writers? Writing under pressure of a deadline is no excuse for poor spelling or other grammatical errors.

Nothing is as dull as clichés. A columnist *must* have something new to say.

In the top ten: Cornelia Carstens, *Mosselbaai Advertiser*; Jan-Hendrik Coetzer, *Hermanus Times*; Johnny Masilela, *Die Pos*; Marlene Jordaan, *Worcester Standard*; Michelle van der Spuy, *Eikestadnuus*; Raymond Willemse, *District Mail*; and Tobie van den Bergh, *Middelburg Observer*.

The top three entries particularly were excellent. They were very well written, with a good sense of humour.

Third: Zita Goldswain, *Witbank News*; second: Murray Stewart, *The Village News*; and first: Riaan van Zyl, *Roodepoort Record*.

Citation: In his 'Bleeding at my typewriter' columns Riaan told his own stories – but all related closely to his community.

Sport

Match reports are important, taking into account that readers can quite often only read about these matches in their local newspapers and nowhere else. However, this does not justify a dull, try-by-try or goal-by-goal report five days after the match has been played.

It is about the liveliness of the writing and *interpreting* the match. Here the journalist must show his or her depth of insight and knowledge of the sport.

The judges were impressed by the variety of sport codes covered in the local newspapers.

In the top ten: Carli Koch, *Lowvelder*; Earl Haupt, *People's Post*; Etienne van Rensburg, *Vaalweekblad*; Joe Dreyer, *Far North Bulletin*; Raymond Willemse, *District Mail*; Tandy-Lee Marinus, *Paarl Post/Worcester Standard*; and Wouter Pienaar, *Potchefstroom Herald*.

Third: David Rush, *South Coast Herald*; second: Hugo Redelinghuys, *George Herald*; and first: Johann Gresse, *Middelburg Observer*.

Citation: The top three clearly know what they are writing about. Johann impressed with his in-depth reporting on athletics, rugby, boxing and hockey.

Human Interest

Local newspapers are synonymous with human interest stories.

There were truly outstanding entries in this section. So much so, the judges often 'wasted time' with remarks like "Isn't this a remarkable story?" or "Have you read this extraordinary tale?"

One such story, written by Summer Jacobs of *Tabletalk*, was about the pen pal correspondence that started in 1947 between a Cape Town woman and a man in England.

Another, by Tshifhiwa Mukhwevho of *Limpopo Mirror*, told the story of a young woman from Switzerland marrying her Venda boyfriend.

There were indeed many stories, much laughter and tears...

However, a lack of empathy showed in some cases, for example, it is very seldom in the best interest of abused or disadvantaged children to identify them, either by name or in photographs. The following is also unacceptable: "Met die terroriste wat daardie jare pal moeilikheid gemaak het..."

The use (or rather misuse) of diminutives, especially in Afrikaans writing, is usually unnecessary.

Clichés and emotional overstatements, e.g. "The community was rocked..." or "The community united in mourning..." should be avoided.

'Human interest' should not be confused with 'news about people'. These are about the emotions, the human side of the story *behind* the hard news story.

In the top ten: Alida Buckle, *Weslander*; Bianca du Plessis, *Hermanus Times*; Lauren O'Connor May, *Northern News*; Lise Beyers, *Paarl Post*; Nadine Williams, *Eikestadnuus*; Nielen de Klerk, *TygerBurger*; and Tshifhiwa Mukhwevho, *Limpopo Mirror*.

Third: Andries van Zyl, *Zoutpansberger*; second: Carina Roux, *TygerBurger*; and first: Desirée Rorke, *TygerBurger*.

Citation: Desirée impressed with her well-written stories. They were told with empathy without being over-emotional.

Investigative Reporting

In general, the entries in this section were disappointing. In many cases straight hard news stories, albeit with a few good follow-ups, were presented as 'investigative reporting'.

This category is about perseverance and courage, innovation and courage. And then the end result – what changes or actions resulted from the work? This was missing in most of the entries.

In the top four: Andries van Zyl, *Zoutpansberger*.

Third: Dustin Wetdewich, *Potchefstroom Herald*; second: Riaan van Zyl, *Roodepoort Record*; and first: Anton van Zyl, *Zoutpansberger*.

Citation: Anton went to great lengths to investigate what happened to the Lotto money allocated to a Vhembe NGO. What he uncovered was "a tale that included a music festival, dietary training workshops and a system where the real beneficiaries are not always mentioned." He also found "a system that is as transparent as a toilet window." The story had some further developments with documents being leaked to the *Zoutpansberger* about irregularities within the National Lotteries Commission. More articles appeared early in 2018.

Hard News

This was a strong section, with many strong, hard-hitting stories. The judges compiled a top twelve list and even then there were a number of entries that were unlucky not to make the cut.

The majority of stories were about crime and service delivery problems. This is of course a sad reflection on current realities. However, journalists should also be on the lookout for 'good news' – everyone needs to feel good about something now and then.

Although the judges felt that the subbing was in general better than last year – perhaps the journalists heeded to last year's suggestion from the judges that they don't enter stories with glaring grammatical errors – lapses in ethical reporting persisted this year.

Some crime stories were written as if the suspect had already been found guilty in a court of law. There should be a very strong and evident public interest to justify identifying a suspect before he or she has appeared in court. The same applies to the publication of unfounded allegations about an arrested person or even publishing his or her criminal record before it has been used in court.

And then the judges frequently encountered the misuse of the word 'suspect' ('verdagte' in Afrikaans): Police look for suspects. But in a hard news story: 'Three armed men (*not* suspects) entered the building...'

Too long sentences and paragraphs should be avoided. And also the mixing of tenses in one story. In many instances the intros were just too long or woolly.

Frequent references to the newspaper, e.g. 'He told *The Newspaper*...' or 'When *The Newspaper* asked...', are completely unnecessary and irritating.

There were still too many stories with only one source. And if that one source was a political figure, especially a local councillor, it made matters worse.

It was encouraging to see that social media were often used to gather information.

In the top twelve: Alida Buckle, *Weslander*; Andries van Zyl, *Zoutpansberger*; Hazel Allies-Husselman, *Athlone News*; Karen Watkins, *Constantia Bulletin*; Ronél van Jaarsveld, *Die Pos*; Samantha Lee, *People's Post*; Tamlynne Thompson, *The CapeTowner*; Trish Goosen, *Weslander*; and Yolande du Preez, *False Bay Echo*.

Third: Elmon Tshikhudo, *Limpopo Mirror*; second: Gerhard Rheeder, *Middelburg Observer*; and first: Dustin Wetdewich, *Potchefstroom Herald*.

Citation: Dustin is clearly not a desk-bound reporter. His stories were well-written, multi-sourced and usually his newspaper's lead story.

Alet Roux Award

The judges were impressed by the sterling work of a number of young journalists with less than three years' experience. They displayed courage, perseverance and *heart* in what they produced. Last year it was *Lowvelder* that could boast of its crop of up-and-coming journalists. This year it is *Potchefstroom Herald's* turn.

Third: Carina Roux, *TygerBurger* and Tamsyn Jantjies, *District Mail*; second: Selogile Leshage, *Potchefstroom Herald*; and first: Marianke Saayman, *Potchefstroom Herald*.

Citation: Marianke's portfolio contained well-written hard news and human interest stories. She is indeed a rising star.

Journalist of the Year

A few entries in this section were disqualified because the prescribed number of articles was exceeded. The judges warned about this last year. The rules say twenty – and that includes the follow-ups. Some entered forty. Also not considered were entries bound in files that needed to be pulled out to read,

This category is about versatility, initiative and tenacity and competition was very strong again this year. A number of entries were unlucky not to make the cut.

In the top ten: Andries van Zyl, *Zoutpansberger*; Bianca du Plessis, *Hermanus Times*; Dustin Wetdewich, *Potchefstroom Herald*; Jamey Gordon, *District Mail*; Joe Dreyer, *Far North Bulletin*; Marianke Saayman, *Potchefstroom Herald*; and Tamlynne Thompson, *The CapeTowner*.

Third: Lise Beyers, *Paarl Post*; second: Trish Goosen, *Weslander*; and first: Zita Goldswain, *Witbank News*.

Citation: Zita presented a well-rounded portfolio: strong hard news front page stories, human interest stories written with empathy and interesting sport features. After four years (she won the award in 2013), Zita rules again.

Front pages

For this category, as well as for the Newspaper of the Year, there were more entries than last year and yet they were by far nowhere near the eighty or so newspapers represented by the various journalists who entered in the other categories of this competition.

There were only two entries of the ‘Community media/grassroots’ newspapers in this section and in the Newspaper of the Year. It was not quite clear whether the two entries were indeed ‘community/grassroots’. The judges decided to move the two entries to ‘Independent commercial newspapers’, with the suggestion to the organisers that they drop the ‘Community media/grassroots’ section for the 2018 competition.

In addition the judges suggest that only newsprint copies are allowed and not A3 pdf-printouts. The current rules state: “Enter the original front pages, not photocopies.”

The criteria for this category are clearly set out in the ‘Call for entries’. The judges looked for imaginative layouts, with an underlying sense of continuity.

Independent commercial newspapers

The judges decided not to award a first prize in this section. General mistakes were that the front pages were rather cluttered, photographs were not used well and headlines were too small.

Third: *Zoutpanberger*; second: *The Village News*; and first: No award.

Corporate-owned free newspapers

The competition in this section was very strong, although the judges found many entries had the same faults we mentioned before – the front pages were rather cluttered, photographs were not used well and headlines were too small.

Third: *People's Post*; second: *Roodepoort Northsider*; and first: *TygerBurger*.
Citation: *TygerBurger* used photographs very well, had strong headlines and very neat layouts.

Corporate-owned paid newspapers

Dramatic photographs and dramatic headlines make for dramatic front pages.
Third: *District Mail*; second: *Paarl Post*; and first: *Die Pos*.
Citation: *Die Pos* used bold headlines and bold pictures. The use of a number of small advertisements instead of one strip is debatable, but somehow it works. The judges were impressed by the consistency in the layout style.

Newspaper of the year

Again, the judging criteria are set out in the 'Call for entries'. The judges looked at the total package: the content (news value of stories, language and style, readers' input), typography/layout (including photographs, headlines and advertisements), printing and production as well as advertisements.

Independent commercial newspapers

A newcomer to the competition has upset the competition between the Limpopo twins.
Third: *Limpopo Mirror*; second: *Zoutpansberger*; and first: *The Village News*.
Citation: *The Village News* offers its readers a wonderful read – and for free, *nogal*. It has a clean, consistent layout, a lively letters and opinions page, a comprehensive diary page and an impressive food, wine and arts supplement. The only fault the judges could find was the rather subdued headlines on the front pages.

Corporate-owned free newspapers

As always, this was a highly contested section.
Third: *Pretoria Rekord*; second: *TygerBurger*; and first: *Roodepoort Northsider*.
Citation: It is clear that *Roodepoort Northsider* serves its community well. It has a neat layout, strong community stories and attractive sports pages.

Corporate-owned paid newspapers, circulation less than 10 000 – Hultzer trophy

The three finalists are all heavyweights.
Third: *Mossel Bay Advertiser*; second: *Potchefstroom Herald*; and first: *District Mail*.

Citation: For the second year running, *District Mail* is the winner in this section. Its readers get good value for money. It really is the 'full package'. The '*Grabouw-nuus*' insert is an added bonus.

Corporate-owned paid newspapers, circulation more than 10 000 – Cronwright Trophy

It is a pity there can be only one winner. As in the previous section, all three finalists are outstanding newspapers.

Third: *Paarl Post*; second: *Middelburg Observer* and first: *Lowvelder*.

Citation: For the umpteenth time (at least the sixth time in a row) *Lowvelder* takes the crown as the best local newspaper in South Africa, circulation above 10 000. Over the years the judges have commended the newspaper for its 'excellent content and attractive layout' and 'readable and attractive package'. Need we say more? It indeed remains 'the complete publication'.