

Rating the rewards

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by Lucy Siebert, Marita Kritzinger and Howard Drakes

A range of awards for journalists in South Africa and the rest of the continent have appeared in recent years. Whether the emergence of these awards, many of which are sponsored by corporate companies, have raised the standards of reporting in Africa is not clear. Media professionals and journalists appear to be somewhat divided on the merit of awards for journalists.

Prof Guy Berger of the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University said the purpose of most awards is to honour and encourage journalists, not to train or influence specific stories. Award winners appreciate the recognition of their work, especially considering **African journalists' salaries often do not reflect their intellectual capital.**

The nature of the prizes is also a contentious issue. Most awards recognise individual journalists by awarding a cash prize.

However, there are some awards, such as the John Manyara Award for Investigative Journalism, which awards winners with study grants and travel opportunities.

The kind of prize and the usefulness of cash depends on what level the winning journalist is at. Journalist Jeremy Maggs commented: **"A travel or training grant is first prize to me** as a mid-career journalist who makes a tidy living." However, Susan Purén, the 2002 winner of the CNN Journalist of the Year Award, said the cash award was very helpful to her. Purén said as a freelance journalist, she had many personal expenses to cover, which she used the US\$7000 prize for. She noted that the laptop she won, has been hugely beneficial to her work and has possibly been the most valuable part of the prize.

The 2002 Natali prize overall winner, Ghanaian journalist, Raymond Archer believes that **prize money** can be used for different ends. "I thought instead of using the money for myself or for my education, I used the



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award money for the benefit of practitioners of the entire profession in Ghana. I wouldn't have been able to make an impact on my fellow Ghanaian journalists without this award." The 10 000 prize money was used to establish the Ghana Centre for Public Integrity (GCPI), an NGO that focuses on investigative journalism and training in the media.

The International Federation of Journalists' (IFJ) Ann-Christina Hansen echoed Archer's sentiments: "I believe that the benefits of awards such as the Natali Prize are manifold. Apart from rewarding and hopefully promoting journalistic excellence, one of the keystones of democracy, the prize money can have very positive effects not only for the individual winners but also for other journalists."

Purén said prizes for journalism are expected to be cash. **"In Africa cash means everything,"** she said. Berger agreed and said cash awards are incentives for African journalists. "Journalists are paid very little in general, so it is helpful to get a cash bonus."

The winner of the 2000 South African Award for Courageous Journalism, Lynne Altenroxel from The Star, said that winning an award is meaningful to journalists who struggle with stories on a daily basis. **"The biggest thing is that it encourages and uplifts you.** Some aspects of my work are emotionally draining and very trying, so this helps to make up for it."

Like Purén, Altenroxel, spent her R10 000 prize money on "day-to-day expenses".

However, Chris Moerdyk, media analyst and consultant, pointed out that although cash is an incentive, it does not necessarily improve the standard of journalism. "Cash is only an incentive to enter awards, not an incentive to become good journalists," he said. Moerdyk felt that journalists are seeking **"peer recognition, bylines and prestige",** rather than an improvement in standards across the board. Moerdyk stressed that cash is not the most useful way to recognise individual work. "If I could have my way there would be no cash prizes at all, rather opportunities like travel grants and training."

The corporate sponsorship of journalism awards could also be problematic for a profession that upholds independence, objectivity and diversity as some of its core values. Most media professionals feel that corporate sponsorship is acceptable, provided the sponsor is a reputable company and that winning journalists continue to work and act independently.

"I hope sponsorship is noble and that the said sponsors also know that association does not mean special favours," Maggs said. For Archer, any journalist that allows him/herself to be compromised by an organisation that sponsors an award is not a professional journalist. "As an investigative journalist I come across many people who are willing to **bribe me to drop a story,** I always turn down such offers and I can see why such sponsorships could compromise me."

Archer said that if a journalist can be influenced by such an organisation then s/he could be compromised by people who might offer bribes. Such a journalist, says Archer, is not corrupted by awards but rather lacks the necessary journalistic integrity.

Editor of the Zimbabwe Independent and winner of the 2002 World Press Review International Editor of the Year Award, Iden Wetherell, believes corporate sponsorship of media awards is beneficial and can have positive effects for all the parties involved. "The media constantly face the threat of ethical compromise from a variety of sources. That doesn't mean we have to shy away from corporate sponsorship. Professional considerations must apply."

Denis Beckett, chair of the Mondi Magazine Awards judging panel, is very much in favour of awards. "My own interest in awards is because when I was a young independent journo with **a maverick magazine** and mighty money problems, the various awards I won did a lot to keep me

at it. Awards provide an additional target to aim for, and stimulated effort. I'd much rather have a society with all the numerous activities that companies sponsor as promotional expenses than a society without them."

Individual journalists who win awards can, however, feel some sort of responsibility to the sponsor, particularly if the award is highly recognised and valuable. Purén said winning the CNN award has affected her work and the way in which she approaches her stories. **"I have felt much more responsible for the work I do** and what kind of stories I keep myself busy with. I almost feel like I can't let CNN down by doing a bad story. I don't know why, but the award hasn't exactly helped my career, it is hard to find work after winning the award," she said.

Being connected to a corporate sponsor, such as CNN, is problematic for some journalists. Matthew Krouse, arts editor of the Mail&Guardian, said there is a real concern among some journalists about being linked to a corporate sponsor, and for this reason, some journalists steer away from awards.

Ann-Christina Hansen believes that awards can have other spin-off effects. "Awarding a prestigious prize to a controversial journalist can raise awareness of specific human rights abuses and **send a strong political signal** to those who commit them."

Awards can be aimed at improving journalism, particularly in specialised reporting, as well as creating networks among journalists and within the media.

Currently there is not sufficient understanding of certain issues among journalists in Africa. Aida Opoku-Mensah, media liaison for the African Information Society Initiative (AISI) Media Awards, believes that better-informed reporting in specialised areas can be beneficial to African countries. The AISI awards focus on information communication technologies (ICTs) and development in Africa.

"If a journalist understands the issues surrounding the information society, then s/he in turn can promote greater and better understanding among various publics. In the long run these awards will strengthen another area of specialisation; more coverage of ICTs and development issues that currently does not really exist."

Financial Mail assistant editor Marina Bidoli says much of the recognition of journalists and the media is done in broad categories that tend to exclude "less exciting" reporting. Business reporting is one of these areas that lack recognition. "I think it's important to be recognised in the sector in which you write." Bidoli has been the winner of an AISI award and been made Telkom ICT Journalist of the Year. Both of these awards focus on ICT reporting.

Alex Zinanga of the Zimbabwe HIV/Aids Policy and Advocacy Project said that the Auxillia Chimusoro Award for HIV/Aids reporting and awareness work has gone a long way in helping the fight against the disease. "The Zimbabwe Aids Policy and Advocacy Project is working with journalists to build their capacity to report responsibly on HIV/Aids issues and also to increase coverage."

Awards that are set up and sponsored by companies and organisations are often the result of awareness about the watchdog role played by journalism and the media and an accompanying drive towards recognising and rewarding this.

Many awards seek to **recognise courage under fire,** competent reporting on broad and specialised subjects and they work to encourage and inspire the recipients and their colleagues to greater levels of quality.

Bianca Wright, a media lecturer at the University of Port Elizabeth and recipient of Telkom and AISI awards, says that awards have an important place in society but that their reach and number is still not sufficient in Africa. While a surplus of awards seeks to recognise many journalists in any number of areas, "There are countries in Africa where press freedom is a myth, where newsrooms have too few journalists to cover anything worthwhile and where criticising the government is forbidden. Until those things are combated there will never be 'enough'."

"What I'd ultimately like to see is **an African version of the Pulitzer Prize,**" Maggs said.

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