

Investigative journalism deserves to be honoured

 By [Anton Harber](#)

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Once a year, I sit down to read the best of the previous year's investigative journalism. Judging the Taco Kuiper Award is a highlight of my calendar.

The prize - to be handed out next week - is in its eighth year and it is different from most such events. It has just one category, unlike those awards which have so many that they seem to be based on the primary school principal's instruction that everyone should get something. The reward is a whopping R300,000 (with R100,000 for a runner-up).

But what I like most is why the prize goes for "a distinguished example of investigative reporting". It does not necessarily go to the biggest story or the most sensational, but one the panel of judges chooses as an exemplar of the kind of public-interest journalism we want to support and encourage.

It's about probing to find what someone wants to stay hidden

Isn't all reporting investigative in nature, I am asked every year. What distinguishes this kind of work? For me it is clear: investigative reporting uses probing techniques to reveal information that would otherwise not be known. It is not coverage of an event, where the purpose - no less noble, let me add - is to tell people something that happened. It is not opinion or analysis. It is reporting that goes beneath the surface to reveal something of importance that someone wants to keep hidden.

Much of it is accountability reporting, keeping in check those with power and authority, such as last year's runners-up: the Sunday Times for their exposé of Cato Manor police misconduct and Greg Marinovich for his important investigation of what happened at Marikana.

But there is also a fair amount of the exploration of the underbelly of our society, such as last year's winner: the Daily Dispatch team that spent weeks visiting rural school hostels to carefully document the terrible conditions, including the fact that 40 of the 70 hostels that were in the education budget did not even exist.

Small can still achieve big results

That work went on to win the CNN African Journalist of the Year award as well, making it clear that relatively small newspapers doing largely local stories without many resources can do great journalism which can compete nationally and globally.

Good investigative reporting is also often the canary in the coalmine of our democracy, drawing our attention to things we might otherwise gloss over. In the news this week is the 10-week-old Marikana strike, with the mining houses suggesting that if it does not end soon they have to close shafts or perhaps mechanise and cut down on jobs.

The investigative reporters, I told myself, are those who will tell us whether this is a threat or a bluff. They will keep us abreast of the incredible hardship that workers must be suffering after nearly three months without pay, and explain why they are holding out against such odds.

The 2012 Marikana killings brought some exceptional on-the-ground reporting that humanised the victims and their families. Will we see the same for the strikers, and get to know them as we know the mining owners and managers? Or will these individuals remain faceless and voiceless?

They deserve to be honoured - and shall be

The quality and extent of our investigative reporting - and the fact that our media can take on the highest office in the land without fear of arrest or closure - signals the health of our democracy. While some of the other institutions of accountability are faltering or under threat, at least some of the private media continue to dig and expose.

Some wonder if this work has much effect, especially at a time when the Presidency and ruling party seem impervious to scandal. It is worth remembering that in recent years investigative reporting has led to the jailing of a commissioner of police, the firing of another and the dismissal of cabinet minister Dina Pule. The arms deal remains on the agenda, and Nkandla is an election issue.

Behind this lie four or five small bands of dedicated reporters, visionary owners and managers who see the value of this work and - perhaps most important of all - the whistle-blowers. Next week, we shall honour them all.

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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