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The Royal Statistical Society announces its journalism award winners for 2021

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is pleased to announce its Statistical Excellence in Journalism award winners for 2021. The awards, now in their fifteenth year, recognise excellence in journalists' use of statistics and data to tell a story.

For 2021, a new category has been awarded - 'Statistical excellence in coronavirus reporting', for an individual or team who has gone above and beyond in their reporting of the pandemic. Awards were also presented in the 'explaining the facts', 'data visualisation' and 'investigative journalism' categories.

The awards are sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), who are a fitting partner for the awards given their world leading research, data and post-graduate training in the economic, behavioural, social and data sciences that help generate vital insights that inform journalists' work.

The 2021 winners are as follows:

Explaining the facts - winner: Covid-19: The global crisis — in data, Financial Times Visual and Data Journalism team *(Steven Bernard, John Burn-Murdoch, Tom Hannen, Bob Haslett, Caroline Nevitt, Jane Pong, Ændra Rininsland, Alan Smith, Martin Stabe, Cale Tilford and Aleksandra Wiśniewska, Claire Manibog)*
This article is a strong example of how statistics and data can tell a story – in this case, of how coronavirus spread across the world. The judges were impressed at the new angles it brought to the analysis of the pandemic – beyond infection and deaths – by presenting data on phenomena such as global travel patterns and the impact on the political divide in the USA. The article also explained the issue of uncertainty in countries' mortality data. Overall, it was considered a powerful read which uses statistics in an interesting and accessible way.

Explaining the facts – highly commended: Covid-19 in the UK: How many coronavirus cases are there in my area?, BBC News, Visual and Data Journalism teams

This online interactive tracker very clearly presented key statistics at a time when the relevance of statistics and data has never been so acute and has consequently been a valuable resource to many throughout the pandemic. The tool was considered to be an effective example of statistics being explained with integrity while avoiding distortion.

Investigative journalism - winner: UK passport photo checker shows bias against dark-skinned women - Maryam Ahmed, BBC news

This investigation, looking into bias with the Home Office passport photo checker, found that women with the darkest skin were four times more likely to have their passport photos rejected than women with the lightest skin. The panel of judges were impressed by the raw data generated for this piece to highlight the important issue of bias in artificial intelligence.

The article is accessible and engaging and the judges were impressed at how complex issues around AI bias were explained succinctly while providing relevant information on methodology.

Investigative journalism – highly commended: US Election 2020: The 'dead voters' in Michigan who are still alive – BBC Reality Check Team (Jack Goodman, Christopher Giles, Olga Robinson and Jake Horton and Dan Isaacs)
This piece looked into the data behind claims by Donald Trump supporters that thousands of votes were cast in the US election using the names of people who had died and found it was not all that it seemed. One judge commented "it is a great piece of detective work". The panel were impressed with the efforts made to look into the issue; interviews with voters added colour to the piece, as did the explanation of "the birthday problem".

Data visualisation – winner: What will climate change look like near me? - Becky Dale, Nassos Stylianou, Alison Benjamin, BBC
This interactive tool gives information based on your postcode on what climate change will look like in your local area – including what temperature it might climb to and how rainy it might be. The panel admired the level of interactivity and the clear explanation of the methodology. The presentation was considered visually appealing, and the piece overall was done in an engaging way that would enable greater public understanding.

Data visualisation – highly commended: The Economist's interactive tracker for Covid-19 excess mortality, James Tozer & Martín González
This article uses graphics to explain why deaths caused by the pandemic across the globe may be higher than official government figures suggest – due to issues with testing, delays with death certificates and a lack of data on deaths caused indirectly. By using 'excess deaths' as a measure to capture those that might be missing, the journalists give a comprehensive view on death rates. The panel liked the regional breakdowns provided, along with the full data and underlying code that was made publicly available.

Statistical excellence in coronavirus reporting – winner: Radio 4's More or Less, (Richard Vadon, Kate Lamble, Tim Harford, Ruth Alexander, Josephine Casserly, Darin Graham)
The judging panel praised the work of More or Less at a time when explaining the numbers behind the pandemic has never been so valuable. The team was among the first to report that the Government's "100,000 tests a day" achievement was based on tests posted out, rather than those completed. Furthermore, they reported how saliva and nasal samples taken from the same patient were counted as two separate tests – explaining the large difference between the numbers of people tested and tests conducted. Their rigorous look into coronavirus statistics has been a valuable resource and the panel noted the influence the programme has had on media discourse and policymaking. The judges were also impressed with the speed at which the team responded to a fast-evolving crisis.

Statistical excellence in coronavirus reporting - highly commended: Tom Whipple, the Times
The judging panel admired Tom Whipple's ability to explain complex statistical issues in a highly accessible way, as well as his skill in debunking falsehoods and challenging policies. Tom's work also effectively shed light on the ways in which numbers and statistics can be

abused by those in power. The panel found the work to be a good example of creative and engaging story-telling, and excellent communication of the uncertainties in science.

Statistical excellence in coronavirus reporting - highly commended: John Burn-Murdoch, Financial Times

John Burn-Murdoch has worked tirelessly in leading the Financial Times' coverage of the pandemic. The panel found his infographics and analysis to be of very high quality, which has made him a go-to source for the latest analysis on the pandemic. John has shown a real commitment to increasing public understanding and his engaging way of presenting and explaining complex datasets has been a truly valuable resource.

Professor Christl Donnelly, RSS Vice-president for external affairs and chair of the awards, said: "As statisticians we often pick out faults with how statistics are reported, but what we look to do with these awards is celebrate the great strides that have been made in journalists' use of numbers to tell a story. I would like to offer my heartfelt congratulations to all our winners and runners-up for their outstanding work."

Dr Catherine Bromley, ESRC Deputy Director of Data Strategy and Infrastructure, added: "ESRC is delighted to support these awards and I congratulate all the worthy winners. Informing the public and building trust through articles that expertly utilise reliable and robust evidence and data is critically important - especially when we are facing such complex and challenging times."

Notes to editors

- To read more about the awards and their criteria go to: https://rss.org.uk/training-events/events/excellence-awards/journalism-awards/
- The Royal Statistical Society (RSS), founded in 1834, is one of the world's most distinguished and renowned statistical societies. It is a learned society for statistics, a professional body for statisticians and a charity which promotes statistics, data and evidence for the public good. Today the RSS has around 10,000 members around the world. www.rss.org.uk @RoyalStatSoc
- The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), a non-departmental public body funded by a grant-in-aid from the UK government. For more information visit www.ukri.org. The ESRC is the UK's largest funder of research on the social and economic questions facing us today. It supports the development and training of the UK's future social scientists and funds major studies that provide the infrastructure for research. ESRC-funded research informs policy-makers and practitioners and helps make businesses, voluntary bodies and other organisations more effective. @ESRC

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