RSS Statistical Excellence in Journalism Awards 2019: Winners

Sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the awards were presented by RSS president Deborah Ashby at a ceremony held at RSS HQ on 11 July 2019.

The awards were presented in four categories:

- Explaining the facts

- Data visualisation

- Investigative journalism

- Regional journalism

'The Journalism Awards honour the outstanding contributions of journalists who are using statistics to question, analyse and investigate issues that affect society,' said Jen Rogers, RSS's vice president for external affairs and chair of the judging panel. 'This year we have seen entries that tackle topics such as NHS targets, Brexit and its effect on the economy, racial diversity, homeless deaths, and child carers. Every year I am impressed with how journalists use statistics to engage audiences from all backgrounds and this year's entries have particularly exceeded my expectations.'

Here are the winners and highly commended entries, with the judges' comments:

Explaining the facts (presented by Professor Paul Nightingale, director of strategy and partnerships, ESRC)

Winner: Ruth Alexander and Tim Harford, BBC Radio 4's 'More or Less'. Following a BBC questionnaire finding that 1 in 5 children are carers, 'More or Less' investigated further and found that the way 'carer' had been defined was responsible for this surprisingly high figure. Their 'Child Carers' segment discussed that examples used to illustrate a statistic are rarely representative of the statistic as a whole. Judges were very impressed by how they sensitively questioned the statistic, whilst not querying the importance of this very serious topic.

Highly Commended: Helia Ebrahimi, Channel 4 News. The judges felt that Channel 4 News' Economics Correspondent has had a crucial role in demystifying economics for the public. She has reported on the impact of Brexit on the UK's economy, including its effects on inflation, living standards, migration, and the public finances – as well as on President Trump's claims about his management of the US economy. Helia has also revealed striking figures about the role consumer debt can play in suicide. She picks out illuminating statistics that enable a greater understanding of complex topics within economics.

Highly Commended: Katherine Sellgren, Hannah Richardson, Dominic Bailey, Tom Calver, Ros Anning, Lilly Huynh, Lucy Rodgers, William Dahlgreen, John Walton, Bella Hurrell and Robert Cuffe, BBC News. This piece of work, focusing on the achievement gap between England's rich and poor pupils, suggests that it will take 50 years to close the gap between them. They projected forward the rate of improvement seen over the last seven years to put into context the Department for Education's positive headlines about improvement. The judges thought this article gave full explanations of statistics relating to school performance and were impressed by the inclusion of graphics to aid understanding of the issues being addressed and a heat map showing the best and worst areas in England.

Data Visualisation

Winner: Aaron Williams and Armand Emamdjomeh, Washington Post. The judges were impressed that 'America is more diverse than ever - but still segregated' managed to communicate a lot of complex ethnicity and diversity data in a very powerful way. The article also offered explanations alongside each of the detailed maps, exploring the reasons behind racial distribution in different parts of the USA. Readers were also offered the opportunity to explore racial integration in their own city.

Highly Commended: Alan Smith, Nic Fildes, David Blood, Max Harlow, Caroline Nevitt and Ændrew Rininsland, Financial Times. 'Broadband speed map reveals Britain's new digital divide' produced some excellent graphics exploring UK broadband provision. The judges commended the analysis as it showed that, in general, urban areas enjoy faster broadband than rural, but that metropolitan centres often have even worse broadband speeds than many rural areas. Outer areas of cities generally enjoy the best speeds. A fully interactive map allows readers to assess broadband speeds in their own areas and see how they compare to the rest of the UK.

Investigative Journalism

Winner: Maeve McClenaghan, Charles Boutaud and the Bureau Local network, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism. The judges thought 'Dying Homeless' was a truly outstanding piece of investigative journalism. After learning that no official body counted the number of homeless people who had died, the Bureau compiled a first-of-its-kind database which lists the names of the deceased and tells their stories. A network of more than 30 journalists across the country investigated homeless deaths in their areas, attending funerals and inquests, interviewing family members, collecting coroners' reports and shadowing homeless outreach teams. They started a call for an official body to log these deaths and, as seen with the Campion winner, the ONS subsequently produced their first official data of homeless deaths in December 2018.

Highly Commended: Niamh McIntyre and Diane Taylor, The Guardian. This work, focused on the treatment of immigrants in Britain, investigated life inside immigration detention centres; prison-like spaces often run by private companies. Collaborating with 15 separate organisations, a 'snapshot day' database was built, receiving information on 188 individuals. This data showed that children were being held in adult detention centres and more than half were defined as an adult at risk, meaning they should have been detained only in extreme cases. Despite detention supposedly only being for short periods before an individual is deported, 84% had not yet been given removal directions and detainees were held for a median of four months.

Highly Commended: Dr Faye Kirkland, BBC News. 'A and E stats may have to be recalculated' highlighted how changes to the way NHS trusts were reporting their A&E performance figures gave the impression that they were performing better than they were and showing artificial improvements when making comparisons to earlier figures. Through involving the UK Statistics Authority, the judges commended Faye as she was successful in forcing NHS England to recalculate their figures, resulting in greater transparency for the public.

Regional Journalism

Winner: Geraldine Scott, Eastern Daily Press. The judges thought that 'Ambulance targets missed in first four months of new system' was an excellent piece of work which demonstrated how ambulance targets were being missed in the East of England following the introduction of new measures. Using interactive graphics, information was communicated effectively and showed changes over time. The data was also fully explained with context, providing great accessibility to the reader.

Highly Commended: Abbie Jones, BBC North West Tonight. This work sourced new data to allow residents in the North West to fully understand how much green belt land they were losing to new housing developments. Judges were impressed as Abbie Jones questioned councils when she felt that the data they had provided was inaccurate and armed the audience with information that had previously been withheld from them.

Statistics of the Year Inspiration Award

At the ceremony, Joe Pinkstone of MailOnline was also presented with an inaugural 'Statistics of the Year Inspiration Award' for his article '10% of the plastic ever made has been recycled', which led to the nomination of our 2018 winning International Statistic of the Year.