

Statistical excellence in journalism – 2009 winners

The 2009 awards recognise work published in the period 1 January 2008 to 31 December 2008.

Print/online articles

First prize – Alice Tarleton

‘Factcheck: how many CCTV cameras?’ – Channel 4 News online

Often repeated statements such as ‘A CCTV camera for every 14 citizens’ and ‘4.2 million security cameras in 2002’ had set Alice Tarleton to ask the questions, ‘counted how? And what about in 2008?’.

Her piece on CCTV cameras was an excellent example of the role of journalists in examining the provenance of figures used in public debate that might otherwise go unchallenged. Alice had explained where blanks had been drawn (information commissioner and parliamentary questions) and what turned out to be a highly-selective survey-based method of counting together with the major assumptions made by the analysts, definitional problems, and the precariousness of multiplying up from two surveyed-streets to derive a poorly-qualified national estimate.

Runner-up – Nic Fleming

‘Mobile madness’ – freelance journalist writing in The Economist

‘Long-term mobile-phone use increases risk of benign tumours!’ contrasted with headlines such as ‘Clean bill of health for the mobile!’.

Nic’s illuminating account was a cautionary one of ‘interphone’, a seven-year international study in which national research teams broke ranks to release single-country reports first despite inevitably smaller samples. Serious design faults in the case-control study were exposed which included differential response rates, weak definition of ‘regular mobile-phone use’ and errors of recall (about use a decade previously when technology was anyway different).

Broadcast

First prize – Mark Easton

BBC TV news – piece on crime figures

This broadcast properly addressed an issue of public importance in which the message from official statistics, whether police reported crime or those derived from the household based British Crime Survey, is not matched by public perceptions. The judges welcomed the discussion of how public perceptions differed at national and local level, and the recognition of the role that the media reporting has played in elevating public concerns. The figures were presented dispassionately, with the implication that viewers can trust the statistics and therefore make informed choices.

Formal commendation – Helen Joyce

‘Charts: Worth a Thousand Words’ – The Economist

The judges formally commended this article for its clear and informative discussion of the development of the use of charts, in many forms, to present data, inform their interpretation and subsequently be used to influence and change policy as, for example, Florence Nightingale’s rose chart on the causes of mortality in the army.