Investigative Reporters and Editors announces winners of 2016 Philip Meyer Journalism Award

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A sophisticated data investigation that revealed doctors who had sexually abused their patients is the first-place winner of the 2016 Philip Meyer Journalism Awards. Other top winners include an innovative project tracking the spread of wildfires in the West and a data-driven investigation that exposed match-fixing in professional tennis.

"This was an incredibly competitive year for the contest," said Brant Houston, one of the contest judges and the Knight Chair in Investigative Reporting at the University of Illinois. "All of judges noted the increased sophistication in the data analysis in many of the entries and how social science methods in journalism have evolved over the past decade. The bar has certainly been raised."

Here are the 2016 winners:


The newspaper took data analysis for a story to new levels of sophistication. The goal was to root out instances in which doctors had abused patients and gone unpunished, but the task was more than daunting. The team built 50 scrapers to pull in more than 100,000 documents. They then used machine learning to analyze all of those documents, searching for keywords that alluded to cases of sexual misconduct. They backed up their findings with other sophisticated data analysis and shoe-leather reporting. The sheer scope of their project was impressive. What was even more impressive were the results. The investigation found that doctors in every state had abused patients, and even when caught, still went unpunished.

Second place: "How Fire Feeds," by Eric Sagara, Scott Pham, Sinduja Rangarajan, and Julia Smith of Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting.

The team used satellite imagery and eight other government data sets to examine three large wildfires in creative, groundbreaking ways. An interactive, visually appealing online presentation guided readers through the analysis, enabling them to explore how fire and topography intersect to create deadly blazes. More than 170,000 acres burned during the fires, leaving the areas vulnerable to flooding and erosion. The project provided a cautionary tale of potential wildfire outbreaks that may pose ongoing risk for years to come.
**Third place:** “Tennis Racket,” by Heidi Blake and John Templon of BuzzFeed News, and Simon Cox of the BBC.

In a first-of-its-kind analysis by a media outlet, BuzzFeed News and the BBC used a million simulations of a series of tennis matches to discover suspicious patterns in shifting betting odds and players who lost matches they statistically shouldn't have. What emerged was a pattern of match fixing among a small group of professional tennis players. During the reporting, a whistleblower shared with BuzzFeed the results of a professional tennis internal investigation that found similar patterns, but the sport shelved the investigation and did nothing. As a result of the investigation, professional tennis stars have called for greater transparency in corruption investigations surrounding the sport, and several government entities have conducted hearings.

The Meyer Award recognizes the best uses of social science methods in journalism. The awards will be presented on March 4 in Jacksonville, Florida at the 2017 Computer-Assisted Reporting Conference. The first-place winner will receive $500; second- and third-place winners will receive $300 and $200, respectively. The award is administered by the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting, a joint program of Investigative Reporters and Editors and the Missouri School of Journalism.

The Meyer Award honors Philip Meyer, professor emeritus and former Knight Chair of journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Meyer is the author of “Precision Journalism,” the seminal 1973 book that encouraged journalists to incorporate social science methods in the pursuit of better journalism. As a reporter, he also pioneered the use of survey research for Knight-Ridder newspapers while exploring the causes of race riots in the 1960s.

The judges for the Philip Meyer Award for Precision Journalism were:

- Rose Ciotta, Associate Editor at EdSource
- Robert Gebeloff, Database Projects Editor at The New York Times
- Brant Houston, Knight Chair in Investigative Reporting at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- David McKie, Investigative Producer in CBC News’ Parliamentary bureau
- Cheryl Phillips, Lorry I. Lokey Visiting Professor in Professional Journalism at Stanford University
- Jodi Upton, Knight Chair in Data and Explanatory Journalism Professor at Syracuse University
- Matt Waite, Professor of Practice at University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The Philip Meyer Journalism Award follows the rules of the IRE Awards in its efforts to avoid conflicts of interest. Work that included any significant role by a Meyer Award contest judge may not be entered in the contest. This often represents a significant sacrifice on the part of the individual — and sometimes an entire newsroom. The IRE membership appreciates this devotion to the values of the organization.

IRE works to foster excellence in investigative journalism, which is essential to a free society. Founded in 1975, IRE has more than 5,000 members worldwide. Headquartered at the Missouri School of Journalism, IRE provides training, resources and a community of support to investigative journalists; promotes high professional standards; and protects the rights of investigative
journalists. The National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting was founded by the Missouri School of Journalism in 1989 and became a collaboration of the school and IRE in 1994.