Investigative Reporters and Editors announces winners of 2015 Philip Meyer Journalism Award

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A data-driven investigation that exposed the human cost of school resegregation in central Florida is the first-place winner of the 2015 Philip Meyer Journalism Award. Investigations that explored the growth of diversity in American cities and revealed the small cadre of attorneys who dominate the U.S. Supreme Court docket are also top winners.

The Meyer Award recognizes the best use of social science methods in journalism. Steve Doig, chair of the Meyer Awards judging committee, said competition was especially strong this year.

“The large number of strong entries this year reflects the increasing use of complex data analysis in newsrooms,” IRE Executive Director Mark Horvit said. “The scope of the work being done by these winning journalists, and others throughout the world, is game-changing. It proves the impact that data-driven journalism can have and the ways it can both illuminate our changing society and expose systems that are failing to serve the public good.”

Winning first place is “Failure Factories,” by Cara Fitzpatrick, Michael LaForgia, Lisa Gartner, Nathaniel Lash and Connie Humburg of the Tampa Bay Times. The team used statistical analysis and linear regression of data from dozens of records requests to document how steady resegregation of Pinellas County schools left black children to fail at increasingly higher rates than anywhere else in Florida. The series focused on failures of school district officials to give the schools the support necessary for success. The judges praised the reporters for dogged work on a project that took 18 months to report and write, and noted that the results underscored what decades of sociological research has shown happens in racially segregated schools.

Winning second place is “The Changing Face of America,” by Paul Overberg, Sarah Frostenson, Marisol Bello, Greg Toppo and Jodi Upton of USA Today. The project was built around measurements across time of the racial and ethnic diversity of each of America’s more than 3,100 counties, going back to 1960 and projected ahead to 2060. The reporters used the results to reveal that high levels of diversity, once found only in a few Southern states and along the border with Mexico, had bloomed out into large areas of the upper Midwest and the Appalachians, for instance. Those results informed the assignments of reporters to find the local stories that illustrated those changes, with the results running in more than 100 Gannett papers and broadcast stations.

Winning third place is “The Echo Chamber,” by Joan Biskupic, Janet Roberts and John Shiffman of Thomson Reuters. The Reuters team analyzed the characteristics of more than 14,400 U.S. Supreme
Court records from nine years’ worth of petitions seeking review by the Court. The analysis showed that 43% of cases eventually heard by the court came from a tiny pool of a few dozen lawyers who represent less than 1% of the more than 17,000 lawyers seeking such review. Further reporting showed that these elite lawyers, mostly representing large corporations, had strong personal connections with the justices, with about half of them having served as clerks to the justices.

The Meyer Award recognizes the best uses of social science methods in journalism. The awards will be presented on March 12 in Denver at the 2016 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) and supported by the Knight Chair in Journalism at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University.

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:

- Sarah Cohen, editor of computer-assisted reporting at The New York Times
- Steve Doig, Knight Chair in Journalism at Arizona State University
- Brant Houston, Knight Chair in Investigative Reporting at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- Philip Meyer, Knight Chair emeritus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and author of "Precision Journalism"
- 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.