

2008 JPBM Communications Award

The 2008 Communications Award of the Joint Policy Board for Mathematics (JPBM) was presented at the Joint Mathematics Meetings in San Diego in January 2008.

The JPBM Communications Award is presented annually to reward and encourage journalists and other communicators who, on a sustained basis, bring accurate mathematical information to nonmathematical audiences. JPBM represents the AMS, the American Statistical Association, the Mathematical Association of America, and the Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics. The award carries a cash prize of US\$1,000.

Previous recipients of the JPBM Communications Award are: James Gleick (1988), Hugh Whitemore (1990), Ivars Peterson (1991), Joel Schneider (1993), Martin Gardner (1994), Gina Kolata (1996), Philip J. Davis (1997), Constance Reid (1998), Ian Stewart (1999), John Lynch and Simon Singh (special award, 1999), Sylvia Nasar (2000), Keith J. Devlin (2001), Claire and Helaman Ferguson (2002), Robert Osserman (2003), Barry Cipra (2005), Roger Penrose (2006), and Steven H. Strogatz (2007).

The 2008 JPBM Communications Award was presented to CARL BIALIK. The text that follows presents the selection committee's citation, a brief biographical sketch, and the recipient's response upon receiving the award.

Citation

The 2008 JPBM Communications Award is awarded to Carl Bialik, the *Wall Street Journal's* "Numbers Guy", for increasing the public's understanding of mathematical concepts.

In his regular columns and blogs, Carl Bialik exposes the misuse of numbers and statistics throughout society and in applications ranging over every part of life, from economics and politics to sports and medicine. His writing does more than document the misuse, however, because he gently introduces sound mathematical reasoning in everything he writes. He shows how to use numbers and mathematics in a way that illustrates sound principles of scientific inquiry, paying careful attention to original sources and using professional mathematical scientists to validate his work.

Carl Bialik exemplifies the best traditions of scientific journalism, bringing mathematics and mathematical thinking to a large readership. The breadth, volume, and quality of his writing are all spectacular.

Biographical Sketch

Carl Bialik was born and raised in New York City, where his sister taught him early math lessons, his father crunched baseball numbers with him, and his mother trained him in statistics. He attended the Bronx High School of Science, where he edited the *Math Bulletin*, was a member of the school and city math team, and was a finalist in the 56th Science Talent Search for his biophysics research at Mount Sinai Hospital. He majored in math and physics at Yale, where he served as executive editor of the weekly *Herald* newspaper.

Bialik has written for the *Wall Street Journal Online* since early 2002. He became a technology reporter the following year. He began writing the weekly online "Numbers Guy" column in 2005. In 2006 Bialik won second place in the online category of the National Society of Newspaper Columnists contest. In March 2007 the column began running every other week on the Marketplace page of the print *Journal*, complemented by a blog updated each weekday. Bialik has also coauthored the online *Journal's* "Daily Fix" sports column since 2002. Outside the *Journal*, he is cofounder of the online *Gelf Magazine* and hosts the magazine's Varsity Letters sports reading series in New York.

Response

I'm immensely honored to receive this award, particularly because of my admiration for all the prior recipients—and my particular appreciation for several who have helped me frequently with my column. Many other members of the AMS and ASA also have provided indispensable help as I try to decipher tricky numbers and explain them to readers, a daily challenge that is always enjoyable.

I encourage your organizations to continue to engage with journalists, as you have done so graciously with me. Numbers are a popular tool to obfuscate and mislead. Too often the press falls prey to faulty figures. We would like to do a better job of writing about numbers and deciding which numbers don't deserve press. And we need your help to do so.

My column is, I hope, a step in the right direction. Its existence and success are a credit to Bill Grueskin, the editor who conceived of it and handed me this fun assignment, and to Jason Anders, who has ably edited and improved the column since its inception.



Carl Bialik