

Covering the Nobels—is it worth the bother?



Enlarge / The tail side of the Jean Dausset's Nobel Medal. Dausset received the prize in 1980.

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One thing we do regularly at Ars is try out new types of content. We can make some pretty informed guesses as to what our readers will want to see but still find ourselves surprised at times—who knew you guys would be such big archeology fans?

But you readers have made it very clear that you're really not into scientific awards and prizes. We've tried out a number and received a clear message: not interested. The one, not-surprising exception had been the Nobel Prizes, which consistently drew a significant readership. (That shouldn't be

much of a surprise, given that our science section started out as a blog named Nobel Intent.)

But that's started to change over the last couple of years, and with the falling reader interest, we're starting to re-evaluate our decision to cover these prizes. So, what follows is an attempt to spell out the pros and cons of Nobel coverage and an opportunity for you to give us your thoughts on the matter.

Prize-worthy?

Prizes are a somewhat awkward fit for science. They usually recognize one or a handful of people as much for their leadership as their science. The projects that are recognized, after all, are typically done by large teams of transient grad students and post-doctoral fellows, who contribute a bit before moving on. And, if you go researching the background of most work, you'll find it involves ideas and materials generated by people who weren't even studying the same problem.

In short, almost all science is a massive endeavor that involves contributions from dozens, if not hundreds, of people, and it's built on a body of knowledge that was assembled by thousands. By picking out just a handful of them to recognize, a prize shortchanges the work of many, many more. And, by typically being limited to honoring one area of research a year and/or specific subject matters, it often leaves out entire fields. The Nobels are especially problematic here, as they focus on the subjects thought to be most important back in the late 1800s.

There are also legitimate questions about whether the Nobels even do a fair job of recognizing the best scientists. Over the last decades, science has grown increasingly international and diverse, getting critical contributions from a population of scientists that is ever-so-slowly beginning to reflect the

population of our planet. Yet the prizes are shifting even more slowly than science as a whole. A study that was released earlier this year found that, even when adjusted for the low gender balances of the past and the lag between discovery and honor, women are badly underrepresented among the prize winners.

The focus on prizes also badly misrepresents the motives of most scientists. Many of them may go into things hoping that one day they'll be shaking the Swedish king's hand, but that idea generally dies on first contact with graduate school. Yet most scientists slog on because they find the problems interesting, enjoy working with other scientists, and, in many cases, genuinely believe their work will actually make the world a slightly better place.

On the other hand

All of that suggests there's good reason for people to tune out prize announcements, and there's not much point in us even considering continuing coverage. But we should recognize that there are some good things about reporting on prizes. For one, they're a chance to humanize scientists. Most times when the rest of the public sees them, scientists are focused on talking about whatever their latest results are. The Nobels give people a chance to see scientists talking about the surprise and excitement of the call from Sweden, thinking back on the people they've worked with, and more. Reporting on the winners gets at the fundamental humanity of the people who do science, something that's often missing from what the public gets shown.

Another nice aspect of covering the Nobels is that it gives people a chance to take a look at a field of research as a whole. A lot of the focus of what we do here (and what other outlets do) is on news. While important, keeping the focus on the latest discoveries can make it harder to understand what's

going on in the field as a whole; news sites don't always provide people with a sense of the history of discoveries or how a field develops. The Nobel prizes are perfect for providing an excuse to step back and understand that history—it's often impossible to understand the prizes without it.

One of the problems with our coverage is how hard it is to gather that sort of background and explanatory detail on a short schedule. While breaking news about the Nobels has come and gone early on the morning of the awards, Ars' coverage usually follows several hours afterwards. Readers who just care about getting a quick outline of the award and its winners might not be interested in getting more details hours later.

Maybe readers will simply be happy enough with a short rundown of who won and what for. We know you will read deep dives into specific areas of science—our recent feature on plate tectonics made that clear. It just appears that you aren't interested in reading about them when they come in response to a prize being awarded.

We're not quite sure what to think of all of that and haven't come to a decision yet. So we thought we'd let our readers give it a ponder and offer suggestions about what you'd actually be interested in seeing.

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