



Awards and Recognition

Who doesn't want to be honored? No doubt, just about everyone. But the question is how to recognize those who deserve the honor. After all, metrics and process will define the prestige of an award.

The IEEE Signal Processing Society (SPS) bylaws and policies clearly lay out that a member of the Board of Governors (BOG) is not eligible to receive a major award from the Society because the BOG votes and selects the winners. It is also stated that a member of the Awards Board is not eligible for the awards selected by this board. Common sense tells us that those who make the selections shall not be included among those selected.

But what about those who are in the middle of the management chain? Whether or not these people are eligible for awards is a gray area, and to decide, one needs to resort to common sense as well. Often we heard complaints such as "How can a technical committee (TC) chair receive a paper award submitted from his/her TC?" or "How can a general chair of a workshop give the best student paper awards to his/her own students?" Understandably, eyebrows are raised when these things occur, no matter how much it is defended that a process was in place to remove conflict of interest. Why? Because the notion of perceived influence is not removable for someone in a position to influence!

So the best that we can do is to avoid that perceived influence and conflict of interest. Often we rely on common practice. Unfortunately, as our community evolves, more people become involved, and many may unintentionally step into a zone of perceived influence just because there

was nothing in writing for guidance. In fact, questions arose such as "Why do the awards often go to the same few people?" To answer this question, we need to encourage more people to get involved with the nominations, not just a small group of people.

The IEEE SPS Executive Committee (ExCom) decided to tackle this issue on two fronts: the nomination process and the selection process. A three-officer committee, consisting of Ahmed Tewfik (VP-Technical Directions, chair), John Treichler (VP-Awards and Membership), and Mari Ostendorf (VP-Publications) recommended to the BOG that the nomination process be democratized. Whereas in the past the nominations traditionally came from TCs, the committee proposed that the process include all the constituents of the Society and individuals, since the Society has grown from a strictly TC-centric structure in the past two decades to one with many major boards in publications, conference, and membership.

They also recommended that a committee, board, or TC shall not nominate one of their own for an award since there are many parallel channels now. Such a policy was approved and adopted by the BOG at its October meeting.

The BOG also approved a proposal from John Treichler to restructure the Awards Board from its current composition of mostly representation from TCs to open nominations in hopes of having senior people with high stature to serve. The position of VP-Awards and Membership will be split into a VP-Membership, who oversees the Membership Board; and an Awards Board chair, who will be a nonvoting member of the BOG, appointed by the president with the consent and advice of ExCom. The Awards Board will select and screen all award nominations, including the Society's major awards, to make it truly an

award board, instead of one that simply selects best paper awards.

Do the above measures address all the aspects of fairness and conflict of interest? Besides technical merits, should we also consider the dimensions of technical area, geography, gender, and economic balance when giving an award?

Take paper awards as an example. Some have complained that some technical areas were not properly represented in best paper awards, although the statistics showed that a long-term average seems quite balanced. Some even argued that each journal shall be given a best paper award. But then the question is, do we want the paper award to be given at the Society level or at the journal level? Most agreed that the Society level is more prestigious.

Beyond the Society level, at the IEEE, there are many awards, but only one technical field award is dedicated to the technical areas of SPS—The IEEE James L. Flanagan Speech and Audio Processing Award that was established in 2002. Isn't it that speech and audio are represented by only two TCs out of 12 in the Society? The good news is that with the dedicated efforts of many, especially John Treichler and his predecessor Michael Zoltowski and their Awards Boards, the new IEEE Fourier Award for Signal Processing has been established—a major milestone in recognizing the importance of contributions of the field of signal processing!

No, there is no perfect process. So why should we care so much about the process? It is because only through a right and just process can we bring about the prestige and respect of an award!