



Steve Johnson

It's a gimmick, but Webby winners pack plenty into five words

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Trying to draw lessons from the Webby Awards given out this week to one organization's idea of what's best on the Internet, you mostly come away impressed at the greatest awards-show gimmick ever.

Sure, it's interesting to look at the wildly divergent list of winners -- everything from Google Earth to the Katrina Help Center to the Sherwin-Williams Color Visualizer -- and realize this medium is still figuring out its standards.

Does it value digital execution, quality of concept or current buzz, or does it, as the Webbys seem to do, try to forever balance all three in a hodgepodge that makes for a pages-long winners' list, some celebrity awards-show participants and lots of entry fees?

But such questions are nothing compared to the gimmick, perhaps the one thing about the Webbys to have actually penetrated the mainstream. Winners, you may have heard, are limited, in their acceptance speeches, to five words.

Five words. Not one more.

So last year, Al Gore, picking up a lifetime-achievement award from the Webby-dispensing group known as the International Academy of Digital Arts & Sciences, said, "Please don't recount this vote."

This year, Arianna Huffington, accepting the best political blog award for her year-old Huffington Post site, said, "Darlings. Make blogs, not war."

Chris DeWolfe, the co-founder of the burgeoning and now controversial social networking site MySpace, said, "Fun for the whole family."

And so on. The drudgery of people who've already won something pretending to be humble about their victory turns into a battle of wits. The nakedly commercial speeches -- Dell's "Thanks, go buy a Dell" -- sound tinny, while the clever ones -- [Earthcam's "for complete speech, visit Earthcam"](#) -- win praise and, likely, site traffic.

If only more established awards shows so relentlessly brought down the hammer of brevity.

In five words, you can still acknowledge the man who negotiates your contract -- "Thanks, my agent, Ari Gold" -- but you have to accept that is all you'll be able to say.

That a Web awards ceremony celebrates, even imposes, pithiness, is ironic. What is the Internet, after all, if not the world's most sprawling book?

But it also makes a kind of sense. When your medium lets you say anything, it becomes that much more powerful when you find just the right thing.

The Webbys were born in 1996 as an offshoot of The Web magazine. The magazine died in 1998, but the awards lived on, administered by the invitation-only digital academy. (Again, "Thank you to the Academy" takes the full five words.)

How much standing is there to a 500-member academy whose own press release touts not the digital luminaries in the membership but "Virgin Group founder Richard Branson, The Body Shop president Anita Roddick, 'Simpsons' creator Matt Groening, Naked Chef Jamie Oliver, and fashion designer Max Azria"?

The whole thing has the taint of trying to borrow some celebrity for the Web, when everybody knows the biggest Web celebrities -- Paris Hilton, Brad and Angelina -- make the cut because they're naked or gossip fodder or both.

Certainly, the Webbys were wise to bestow a lifetime award on the musician Prince, who used the Internet to deliver music directly to fans long before MySpace or iTunes. He performed at the awards ceremony, held Monday in New York City, and he gave a zen gem of an acceptance speech: "Everything you think is true."

The "virtual hip-hop" band Gorillaz as artist of the year seems to jibe with what rock critics think, and if you didn't name MySpace "Breakout of the Year," you'd deserve a permanent service interruption. For the complete list of winners and nominees, which, like most Internet awards lists, is a great way to kill a few hours and discover new sites, visit www.webbyawards.com.

But giving author and New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman "person of the year" seems off. He's an old-media guy and, worse for Internet surfers, hidden behind the paid wall of the digital New York Times' TimesSelect plan. They don't give Oscars to people who aren't central to filmmaking.

The paid wall, granted, is not Friedman's fault. But it's a blow to the spirit of the Web, as it struggles, amid pressure to wring cash from it, to hold on to the looseness that can insist on everyone from the internationally famous to a previously unknown Web designer making a five-word speech.

The limit speaks the loudest.

sajohnson@tribune.com