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Tech Billionaires Milner, Zuckerberg Plus Seth MacFarlane Host Awards To Celebrate World's Top Scientists

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Kerry A. Dolan

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The winners of the Breakthrough Prize for life sciences, physics and math. Nov. 8, 2015 at NASA Ames Research Center (photo: Kerry Dolan)

How do you make the world's best scientists into celebrities and household names? Some **tech** billionaires are working toward that end by holding an awards ceremony in Silicon Valley and bringing in Hollywood celebrities like **Seth MacFarlane**, Russell Crowe, Hilary Swank and singer **Pharrell Williams**. On Sunday night November 8, the Breakthrough Prize awards were held at **NASA** Ames Research Center.

For the third year running, tech billionaire investor **Yuri Milner** and his friends Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Google cofounder Sergey Brin, 23andMe founder Ann Wojcicki and Alibaba CEO Jack Ma want the world to celebrate the great research being done in fundamental physics, life sciences and math. Each of the seven winners tonight gets \$3 million and a chance to stand onstage before a crowd of Silicon Valley's leading lights,

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in a ceremony broadcast live on the National Geographic channel.



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and billionaire tech investor Yuri Milner, hosts of the 2016 Breakthrough Prize Ceremony in Silicon Valley (photo credit: Getty Images)

It was a real who's who of Silicon Valley, Hollywood and beyond in attendance. Spotted in the crowd: Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes sitting next to Laura Arrillaga Andreessen, wife of venture capitalist Marc Andreessen; Rupert Murdoch, whose Fox network will rebroadcast a one-hour version of the awards on Nov. 29; Zynga founder Mark Pincus; Uber CEO Travis Kalanick and Univision Chairman Haim Saban (perhaps better known as the man behind kids TV show Mighty Morphin Power Rangers).

An advertisement for F.S.T. Fine Science Tools. On the left, a pair of surgical forceps is shown against a white background within a black frame. To the right, the text 'F.S.T.' is prominently displayed in white on a dark purple background, with 'FINE SCIENCE TOOLS' in smaller white text below it. Further down, the text 'FINE SURGICAL INSTRUMENTS FOR RESEARCH.' is written in yellow and white. At the bottom right, a yellow button contains the text 'CLICK HERE TO VIEW PRODUCTS' in black. In the top right corner, there is a small 'AdChoices' logo.

This year the organizers added a new prize for a junior scientist in conjunction with Khan Academy, the online video educational website founded by Sal Khan. Ryan Chester, the 18-year-old winner of the Breakthrough Junior Challenge for students, gets a \$250,000 in scholarship funds for an original video that brought to life a scientific or mathematical idea or principle. His video explains Einstein's special theory of relativity. His science teacher from his high school in North Royalton, Ohio, won \$50,000. And his school will be getting \$100,000 to put toward a new science lab.

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High school student Ryan Chester, winner of the Breakthrough Junior Challenge award, for his video explaining The Special Theory of Relativity (photo credit: Getty Images)

One of the organizers told me that for the Breakthrough Junior Challenge, the judges narrowed it down to 15 contenders before choosing a winner. The videos from this select group were so good that they are all going to be posted on the Khan Academy website.

The five winners in life science are Karl Deisseroth, a bioengineering and psychiatry professor at Stanford; Ed Boyden, a professor of biological engineering and brain and cognitive studies at MIT; Helen Hobbs, professor of internal medicine and molecular genetics at Univ. of Texas

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Southwestern; John Hardy, a professor of neuroscience at University College London; and Svante Pääbo, director at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology.

Deisseroth and Boyden get the award for their work on optogenetics – described by the Breakthrough Prize organizers as “the programming of neurons to express light-activated ion channels and pumps, so that their electrical activity can be controlled by light”; their research opens a new path to treatments for Parkinson’s, depression, Alzheimer’s and blindness. Hobbs “discovered human genetic variants that alter the levels and distribution of cholesterol and other lipids, inspiring new approaches to the prevention of cardiovascular and liver disease,” according to the Breakthrough Prize organizers. Hardy discovered mutations in the Amyloid Precursor Protein gene (APP) that cause early onset Alzheimer’s. Pääbo “pioneered the sequencing of ancient DNA and ancient genomes, thereby illuminating the origins of modern humans and our relationships to extinct relatives such as Neanderthals” says the Breakthrough Prize.

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Professor Helen Hobbs of Univ. of Texas Southwestern won a Breakthrough Prize for her work on genetic variants and cholesterol. (photo credit: Steve Jennings/Getty Images for the Breakthrough Prize)

Ian Agol, Associate Professor
Department of Mathematics at
University of California, Berkeley, is
the winner of the math award.

SS For physics, actress Lily Collins — who said she competed in science competition growing up in Los Angeles — and Whatsapp founder Jan Koum (who doesn't make many public appearances) — awarded the Breakthrough Prize to five groups from around the world for their work on neutrino oscillation. The prize will be shared by some 1,300 physicists on these five teams, located as far afield as Tokyo, China, Queen's University in Canada, and U.C. Berkeley. A video accompanying the prize explained that neutrinos changing from one type to another is neutrino oscillation, and understanding this is helpful to understand the beginning of the universe.

Milner told FORBES he supports the

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awards because he wants top scientists to be celebrities again. “There was a time when a scientist could be a celebrity. We have evolved to where it’s more entertainers and athletes that are celebrities. It’s way out of balance,” Milner explained in a call with Forbes before the awards.

Mark Zuckerberg agrees. “By challenging conventional thinking and expanding knowledge over the long term, scientists can solve the biggest problems of our time,” Zuckerberg said in a statement. “The Breakthrough Prize honors achievements in science and math so we can encourage more pioneering research and celebrate scientists as the heroes they truly are.”




Alibaba CEO Jack Ma, one of the sponsors of the Breakthrough Prize event, sent a video message from China.

The previous two years’ winners served as the judges for this year’s awardees.

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Zimbabwean businessman [Strive Masiyiwa](#) has announced that his mobile telecom company, Econet Wireless, is launching a new Pay-TV service called 'Kwesé TV' within the next few months.

In a post on his [Facebook page](#), Masiyiwa said that Kwesé TV will offer exclusive sports and entertainment programming to customers in English-speaking African countries. The new business will be built around Econet's core capabilities of satellite communications, fibre optic networks, and mobile services.



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“Kwesé” is a Shona word that means “everywhere” and “anywhere”.

Masiyiwa said his new TV service will be a new experience aimed at a mobile generation that is highly discerning on what it is willing to pay for.

“This is because much of what is out there is either too expensive or just not worth paying for,” said Masiyiwa.

Econet Wireless currently operates one of the largest independent and satellite and fiber optic infrastructure in Africa, which will be deployed to provide the pay television service across Africa.

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Masiyiwa said the new Pay TV service will be available across all types of screens – smartphones, tablets, laptops and television sets.



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