

Oops! Nobel chemistry winners are announced early in a rare slip-up

October 4 2023, by Karl Ritter



Permanent Secretary of the Royal Academy of Sciences Hans Ellegren, center, announces the winner of the 2023 Nobel Prize in Chemistry, at the Royal Academy of Sciences, in Stockholm, Wednesday, Oct. 4, 2023. The Nobel Prize in physics has been awarded to scientists Mounqi Bawendi, Louis Brus and Alexi Ekimov for discovery and synthesis of quantum dots. Credit: Claudio Bresciani/TT News Agency via AP

The most prestigious and secretive prize in science ran headfirst into the digital era Wednesday when Swedish media got an emailed press release revealing the winners of the [Nobel Prize in chemistry](#) and the news prematurely went public.

The [Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences](#) said it was investigating.

About four hours before the official announcement was planned Wednesday, several Swedish media received a press release from the academy revealing that U.S.-based scientists [Moungi Bawendi](#), [Louis Brus](#) and Alexei Ekimov had won the [2023 chemistry prize](#) for their work on quantum dots.

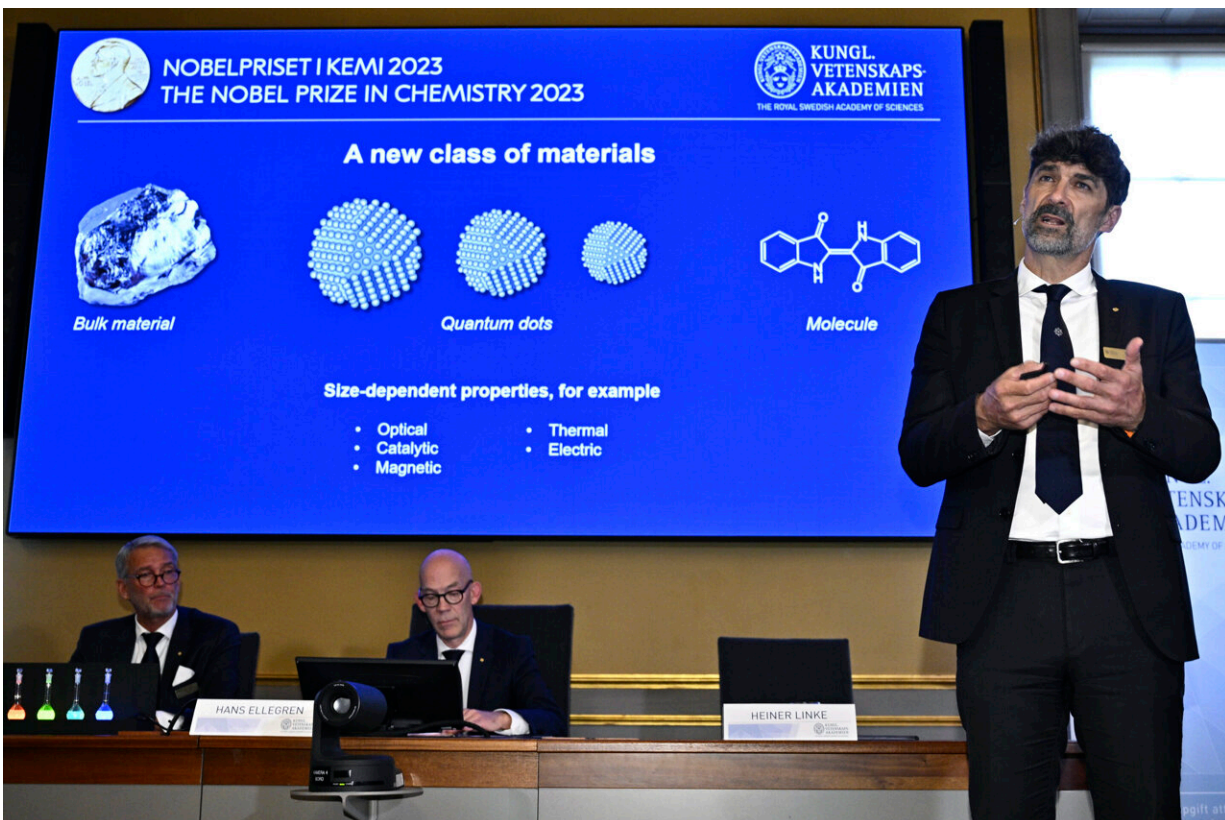
The Associated Press did not receive the press release in advance and decided not to publish the names until confirmed by the academy, but many Swedish media organizations did. Many were suspicious of the email at first. They published the information, however, since the academy didn't write it off as false, merely insisting that the final decision on a winner had not yet been taken.

"We don't know what happened," the academy's secretary-general, Hans Ellengren, told The Associated Press. "This is very unfortunate, and we regret very much that that this happened. Exactly what happened I can't tell, because we don't know ourselves."

The five-member Nobel Prize committees spend months whittling down lists of nominations before the full academy makes its official decision on the day of the award, announcing Nobel winners at a scheduled news conference.

Wednesday's premature press release reinforced suspicions that the final decision is just a formality, since material including background information on the winners must be prepared in advance.

More importantly, it showed the difficulty of keeping anything secret for long in the age when virtually everything is online.



Nobel Committee for Chemistry Heiner Linke, right, presents the work of the winners of the 2023 Nobel Prize in Chemistry during a press conference at the Royal Academy of Sciences, in Stockholm, Wednesday, Oct. 4, 2023. The Nobel Prize in physics has been awarded to scientists Mounji Bawendi, Louis Brus and Alexi Ekimov for discovery and synthesis of quantum dots. Credit: Claudio Bresciani/TT News Agency via AP

"It is an important principle that the prize winners are the first to find out, and that everyone else finds out afterward at the same time," the former head of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, Göran

Hansson, told news agency TT. "But in the electronic era the leaks can occur in different ways than in the newspaper era."

Until just under a decade ago, the academy sent a courier to AP and other news agencies carrying an envelope with the names of the winners. The courier would be connected to the academy by phone and wait for a cue to hand over the envelope at the moment the prize committee started reading the names of the winners.

The academy stopped the practice since the awards were being announced simultaneously on the digital platforms of the Nobel Prizes.

It is not the first time the names of winners slip out before the Nobel announcements. The literature prize, in a particular, was plagued by leaks in recent decades. And in 2010, Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet published the name of the medicine winner in advance.

TV4, public broadcaster SVT and news agency TT were among the Swedish media who received the news release by email at 7:31 a.m., just over four hours ahead of the scheduled prize announcement at 11:45 a.m.

Ellengren, the academy's secretary-general, said it would not comment on the exact process of nominating and awarding Nobel Prize laureates.

"The actual decision is not made until the academy meets the very same day as we announce the prize," he said.

For the official press release to be published in advance is extremely rare, said Fredrick Malmberg, head of news at Swedish television station TV4.

"I have worked since 1995 at TV4 and I cannot remember anything like

this before," he said. "It is incredible."

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