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Accuracy in Media Collection

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Organization's Goal: Accuracy in News

Even though Abraham Kalish feels his organization has been "generally ignored" by the news media, he says he isn't discouraged.

"You can't really tell the effect we've had," Kalish said, "but I've been noticing some little changes."

The changes are in the attitudes of newspapers, radio and television stations toward the public correction of their mistakes, said Kalish, who is the executive secretary of Accuracy in Media (AIM).

“We investigate charges of serious factual errors and omissions in news reporting,” says an AIM policy statement. “If the errors are admitted or proven, we ask that corrections be made.”

It was the reluctance of several large news organizations to correct their errors that led to forming of AIM about three years ago, according to Kalish.

Eye on Press

He said that it was felt that an organization would have a better chance than an individual of persuading a newspaper or TV network to print or air a retraction or correction.

One of the main functions of the press is to keep an eye on the government for the public, Kalish said, and AIM provides a means for the public to watch the press.

AIM's main source of complaints about inaccuracies and distortions in the news media come from readers and listeners, according to Kalish.

He said volunteers also "spot check" the press "just like the Internal Revenue Service scrutinizes tax returns."

AIM currently has about 15 cases of alleged inaccurate news reporting under study, Kalish said.

If the organization is unable to convince a newspaper it has misrepresented the facts, Kalish said, AIM on occasion has been successful in buying advertising in the publication to present its views.

AIM has been instrumental in persuading a television network to admit it had presented some erroneous information in a documentary on defense spending.

The group also has filed suit against the Federal Communications Commission for failure to enforce the "Fairness Doctrine" in public broadcasting.

AIM tends to take the conservative side of many issues involving the press, although it is a nonprofit organization supported by contributions and has no paid staff members.

Kalish, a retired instructor at the Defense Intelligence School in Washington, said AIM has received about $50,000 this year from foundations, clubs and individuals.

He said most of the money has been spent for newspaper ads, newsletters to contributors, and press releases.

AIM supports the concept of a national press council, Kalish said, although he is concerned it will be used as a forum for the news media to complain about government suppression.

He said the proper role of a press council, such as the one recently planned by the Twentieth Century Fund in New York, should be to hear public complaints about the news media.

Kalish said there appears to be too many press representatives on the proposed council and not enough members from the public sector.
Indians on a Rampage

To the Editor:

Your editorial of Nov. 22 describing the Indian occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs bore little resemblance to descriptions of that incident as reported in various newspapers.

The editorial suggested that the news media had not given any indication of events that had led up to the occupation and the rampage, explaining that the occupation began as a spontaneous act of anger and frustration, "set in motion by rigid governmental responses to the Indians' complaints." According to the editorial, "Interior's refusal to negotiate so inflamed the occupiers that a small group among them, preparing for a bloody assault, appear to have gone temporarily berserk."

However, on Nov. 3 your news columns reported that the scheduled program of the 500-odd Indians who had descended on Washington had broken down because of "a lack of housing, food and funds that the Indians had expected to find." They protested having had to sleep in a church that had sheltered other groups of demonstrators in the past.

High Administration officials met with the Indians and promised to try to find them housing and other facilities in Washington. An auditorium at the Labor Department was put at their disposal 24 hours a day.

According to your news stories, efforts by the officials to explain what was being done to help Indians were greeted with shouts such as: "You should turn the bureau over to us; we should be over you."

The Times reported that the twenty-point program the Indians had said they wanted to discuss was nearly forgotten in the "heated, confused meeting."

The damage to the building began when guards and Park Police tried to force the Indians from the building at the close of business on Nov. 2. Groups of Indians ran through the halls, smashing door glass, breaking furniture and barricading doors. Federal officials then held another long session with the Indians. After it ended at midnight, one of the Indian spokesmen told the press that "doors were opening," and he expressed gratitude for the many offers of help and shelter that had been received from the community.

Nevertheless, the occupation lasted six more days, with nearly $2 million in damage being done to the building. It was subsequently brought out that the occupying group did not include a single Indian tribal leader, but it did include among its leaders three men with criminal records, including convictions for burglary and armed robbery. That was not reported by The Times.

ABRAHAM H. KALISH
Executive Secretary
Accuracy in Media
Washington, Nov. 30, 1972
WASHINGTON—An organization that grew out of a group of frustrated letter-to-the-editor writers is taking on some of the giants of the news media and using as a battle weapon one of the industry’s own tools—advertising.

The group is called AIM, for Accuracy in the Media. Its chief target is “inaccurate and biased news coverage,” in which it believes is rampant.

Founded three years ago on a nonprofit basis, AIM operates out of borrowed office space in downtown Washington with a volunteer staff of about 20 and a budget that last year totaled only $7,000.

When a possible reporting error is spotted, AIM investigates, frequently calling on one of its member-experts to document the inaccuracy. If the report is substantiated, AIM requests a correction, then buys ads to publicize the error if it’s not retracted.


Asked why in one interview, Abraham H. Kalish, AIM’s 66-year-old executive secretary, replied: “It’s like asking a robber why he robs a bank—because that’s where the money is.”

Has scored some victories

AIM has scored a few victories. In September, for instance, the American Broadcasting Co. (ABC) admitted five factual errors in a news documentary “Arms and Security . . . How Much is Enough?” after AIM critiqued the program.

It has also drawn praise from some congressional leaders, particularly southerners like Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., and Rep. F. Edward Hebert, D-La., chairman of the powerful House Armed Services Committee.

But AIM’s most conspicuous activity has been its ads.

NBC news commentator David Brinkley was AIM’s first target. He was taken to task last January in a Washington Post ad for comparing the United States to 18th century Prussia for spending two-thirds of its tax income on the military. AIM said the figure was more like 40 percent.

Then in June, a two-column ad in the New York Times blasted correspondent Anthony Lewis for alleged inaccuracies in reports he filed from North Vietnam about the effectiveness of the U.S. mining of Haiphong harbor.

A month later, AIM tried to put another ad in the New York Times attacking columnist Tom Wicker for alleged sloppy reporting. When the newspaper delayed, Kalish issued a statement “denouncing this footdragging as a blatant violation of free speech.” The ad, headlined “Can you Trust the New York Times?” eventually ran in the Washington Star-News.

Non-partisan label challenged

AIM, in public statements and bulletins, has also taken sight on such varied prey as:

The Public Broadcasting System (for criticizing Mr. Nixon’s Vietnam policy) . . . columnist Jack Anderson (for reporting unsubstantiated claims that Sen. Thomas Eagleton, D-Mo., had been arrested repeatedly for drunk driving) . . . Daniel Ellsberg (Kalish says publication of the Pentagon Papers was “unethical and illegal” and that if he had been offered them he “would have called the police”) . . . the Newspaper Guild (for breaking with tradition and endorsing Sen. George McGovern for president).

Kalish contends AIM is strictly non-partisan: “We’re not interested in the philosophies or the beliefs of the people who do the writing and editing. All we’re interested in is that the public gets the final product accurately.”

Some AIM victims disagree, Tom Wicker, an associate editor of the New York Times, points out that it appears AIM attacks only liberals, attempting to “put the fear of God in their news organizations.”

Pro-military stance

“After several exchanges of letters with them, my impression is that AIM is much more concerned with ideology than errors of fact,” Wicker said.

Even a casual glance at AIM’s publications indicates a decidedly pro-establishment, pro-military and anti-Communist bent.

Kalish, a retired communications teacher at the Defense Intelligence School here and a former U.S. Information Agency feature writer, and several other AIM leaders have close ties to the military and the government.

But if AIM appears pro-military, Kalish says it’s only because “most of the media is slanted to what I call the HEW (Health, Education and Welfare) news complex.”

“They’re all against military expenditures and think there should be a reordering of priorities to shift more money to domestic HEW programs,” he continues. “Fostering that point of view, they slip into errors.”

AIM says its role is to correct these “mistruths” and supply the public with accurate news.

The group dates back three years when several Washington lawyers, journalists and government workers, who had been writing letters to the editor for years, began gathering for luncheon discussions.

“One man suggested we form an organization,” Kalish recalls. “The theory was that if an individual wrote a letter to a news organization, he gets ignored. Someone writing in behalf of an organization gets a better response.”

In addition, individual members could poll their resources, research issues
thoroughly and follow up correction

Finally, AIM founders hoped to
establish a press council system similar
to that in England, or at least a series of
informal meetings with news executives
to discuss media problems.
This never panned out. AIM found
news executives uncooperative and “very
reluctant” to correct mistakes, Kalish
says.

No longer ignored

Operating on the premise that “leading
news organizations are not meeting the
standards we set for them,” AIM
persisted in its attempts to document
alleged errors, informing editors of their
findings in letters, news releases and
phone calls.
“They were largely ignored,” Kalish
said.

Kalish, however, feels the organization
has made progress. “When we used to
call up news editors, they’d want to know
who we were and what we were up to,”
his said. “Now they’re very polite. They
hear our case. Our letters are answered
much more promptly and completely.”
And when AIM sponsored a luncheon
at the National Press Club in July, the
Washington Post, a frequent AIM target,
reported on a speech by James Keogh,
a former TIME magazine editor.

To AIM’s displeasure, however,
both major wire services, AP and UPI,
ignored the event and Keogh’s observation
that “journalistic distortion became
“painfully obvious” to him when he went
to work as a White House aide in the
Nixon administration.

(I found, watching my profession
from the inside of government and poli-
tics for two years, that the most im-
portant media—the big television net-
works, the most influential newspapers,
the biggest magazines—tended to reflect
the same bias,” Keogh said in an address
AIM circulates. “Their reporting too
often showed an obsession with the nega-
tive, a left of center ideological con-
formity and a tendency to exaggerate
whenever exaggeration suited their point
of view.”)

AIM’s activities have increased this
year as its budget has grown from the
$7,000 in 1971 to an estimated $30,000
for this year, all collected from indi-
vidual donors.
It now puts out a monthly report on
its activities with detailed documentation
of ways it feels the media is failing the
public and periodic “bulletins” on spe-
cific crisis areas as they develop.
Kalish, who serves without pay, re-
cently moved from a 10th-floor office he
shared with his wife’s answering service
in downtown Washington to more roomy
quarters and he talks of sponsoring a
symposium on “The News Media and the
Free Enterprise System.” “A lot of trade
associations feel the news media has an
inherent dislike of the free enterprise
system,” he says.

Reputation has grown

As AIM’s reputation has grown, it has
received frequent requests from groups
and individuals across the nation to set
up local affiliates, or investigate alleged
inaccuracies in local newspapers.
AIM has balked at this, Kalish says.
First, it doesn’t have the resources to
investigate the complaints. Secondly,
“This idea of policing or controlling
local groups is behind us,” he says.
At least one Louisvillian, Sam Draper,
president of the 12-member Highland
Writer’s Group and a persistent Courier-
Journal critic, has corresponded with
AIM, according to Kalish.
AIM “appreciates moral support” and
financial contributions from places like
Louisville, Kalish says. But, he adds,
“We have no local groups, we have no
local members and nobody has any
authority to speak in behalf of AIM.”
And what does Kalish suggest if some-
one has a complaint against their local
paper?
Form a watchdog organization like
AIM, collect money and buy ads to pub-
licize media mistakes, he says.
December 11, 1972

Mr. A. M. Rosenthal
Managing Editor
The New York Times
New York, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Rosenthal:

Thank you for your letter of November 23. It was nice to hear from you again. I am sorry that you somehow received the impression that our interest was in scoring points rather than in seeking information. The fact is that even if we had an interest in scoring points, we could not do so if the opposition had an effective defense. In those cases in which it appears that an error has been made, it obviously is our responsibility to test the defense. If it proves to be inadequate, I suppose you might say that we score a point, but that is not our objective. Our objective is to try to get the error corrected and to inspire greater efforts to avoid errors in the future.

I am glad to know that you will give consideration to the suggestion that the term "heroine overdose" is misleading. The Times would perform a great service in correcting the terminology if it is indeed improper. And we do not intend to crow about it.

Now that you are again communicating with us, perhaps you would like to comment on the section on page 6 of the enclosed AIM REPORT on The Times report on Hanrahan's acquittal. It is our judgment that The Times report was by all odds the least fair and objective of any of the papers we surveyed. That is not what we would like to see from our newspaper of record.

Sincerely yours,

Abraham H. Kalish
Executive Secretary

cc: Arthur Ochs Sulzberger
Murray J. Rossant
AIM for Accuracy

To err is human enough, but those in the news business should never do it. This is the stern thesis of a Washington-based organization called Accuracy in Media, and it is wielding a potent weapon to challenge any misconceptions in the advertising. Founded three years ago on a nonprofit basis, AIM operates with a volunteer staff of 30 and a modest budget of $15,000 in contributions. It seeks out errors in news reporting and commentary, requests retractions, then buys ads to publicize the mistakes if they are not corrected.

The first AIM ad took NBC's David Brinkley to task last January in the New York Post for likening the U.S. Washington Post for likening the U.S. State Department's report to 19th-century Prussia because it spent about two-thirds of "regular tax income" for military purposes (AIM claimed the U.S. figure was more like 40% of all income). In June, AIM took a two-column ad in the New York Times to condemn Correspondent Anthony Lewis for reporting as fact from Hanoi that the U.S. mining of Haiphong harbor was ineffective without checking out the facts. AIM plans to place another ad in the Times charging Columnist Tom Wicker with a variety of minor inaccuracies over the past two years.

Critics of AIM claim it is prone to nitrinicking and preoccupied with criticizing news judgment rather than errors of fact. But Abraham Kalish, 66, the organization's executive secretary and former feature writer for the U.S. Information Agency, insists: "All we're interested in is accuracy—to be an ever-present pro to the news media so they will strive to be sure their stories are accurate."

AIM Replies to Post

Mr. Richard Harwood, assistant managing editor of the Washington Post, has responded to criticisms of the House collogu on the deterioration of America's defense posture. In a signed letter, Mr. Harwood

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425 - 13th Street, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20004
202-737-9357
Accuracy in Media: The Case Against "Advocacy"

Keough Hits "Advocacy"

At AIM Press Luncheon

WASHINGTON, July 31, 1971.正因为成为了一名记者，所以你必须适当地去了解和研究你所报道的事件。这并不是因为你在其中的利益，而是因为你对真相的追求。——艾伯拉罕・卡利什


text continues...
Dear Mr. Rossant:

I have read your task force report, "A Free and Responsive Press," and the background paper by Alfred Balk with great interest. I appreciate your having had this sent to me. It makes it clear, as the newspaper reports did not, that the main intended function of the proposed council is to deal with complaints about the accuracy and fairness of news coverage.

However, there does remain a question about the blind eye that your task force and Mr. Balk turned to the "Work of Accuracy in Media. It is astonishing that Mr. Balk should not mention AIM in his summary of organizations that have been active in the field of press criticism. He devotes over eight pages to the Minnesota Press Council, an organization that has handled only two complaints, according to Mr. Balk. Ten pages are devoted to the Honolulu Community-Media Council, an organization whose greatest achievement so far appears to have been the passage of a resolution urging, among other things, that those who are killing and wounding Americans in South Vietnam not be referred to as "the enemy."

How this can be justified while AIM is totally ignored is difficult to understand. Mr. Balk is well aware of AIM's existence, since we provided him with a devastating criticism of a short note that he published on our organization in the CJR. He published a large part of our reply. Mr. Balk has received our reports regularly, and he knows very well that we have investigated several times as many complaints as either the Minnesota or Hawaii press councils. Most of these have involved significant issues.

We therefore wish to file a complaint against Mr. Balk and the Twentieth Century Fund concerning this serious error of omission in your report. It would surely not be an auspicious beginning for the proposed press council, devoted as it is to accurate and fair reporting, to be launched on the basis of a report that failed to review the work of the one citizens' organization that has the most solid record of work and achievement in this area. I believe that you owe it to the cause of accuracy and fairness to revise Mr. Balk's paper to include a section on the work of AIM.

And in the interest of accuracy, I want to correct my statement in my earlier letter about the task force lacking a representative of the public who had been conspicuously active in press criticism. I had forgotten Justice Peterson's association with the Minnesota Press Council.

Sincerely yours,

Abraham H. Kalish

cc: Alfred Balk
Dear Mr. Sulzberger:

A reader of the Times has called our attention to an important story carried in The Times of December 2 which probably misled many readers because of the way it was written and played.

The page-one headline read: "Price Commission Approves Rises for G.M. and Ford No. 1 Maker Gets $54, All it Sought--Ford Granted Two-Thirds of Request."

There followed nine paragraphs on page 1, but it was not until the tenth paragraph--on page 70--that one learned that the price increases "were allowed only because they represented additional costs incurred to meet Federal safety and emission-control standards for vehicles."

I believe that you will readily agree that the information contained in the tenth paragraph of this story was important. The reader who did not pursue the story to the jump page, not to mention those who did not get beyond the headlines, was not informed of the fact that the increase in prices was not caused by wage pressures, reduced productivity, or profiteering. He might have imagined any of these explanations. He was not told that there is a cost to the more stringent safety and anti-pollution controls which has to be reflected in the cost of new automobiles.

Perhaps it was only carelessness on the part of the reporter, Mr. Edward Cowan, that led him to relegate this important and highly relevant information to a position in the story where it was bound to be missed by many readers. However, such carelessness cannot be considered excusable for a newspaper as important as The New York Times.

Sincerely yours,

Abraham H. Kalish
Executive Secretary
Accuracy in Media
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Accuracy in Media

Editor, The Wall Street Journal:

In his letter, Mr. Gunn, president of the Public Broadcasting Service, states that PBS is firmly committed to the presentation of balanced and fair public affairs programs. Accuracy in Media currently has three complaints before the FCC charging PBS with violations of the fairness doctrine and Section 396 (g) (1) (A) of the Public Broadcasting Act for broadcasting specific public affairs programs that were seriously lacking in balance and fairness. One of these programs involved a panel discussion of the speech in which President Nixon announced the mining of North Vietnamese ports. The panel included only critics of the President's action, and the moderator, Sander Vanocur, acknowledged this in introducing the panel. He said it was going to be unbalanced, and it was.

One gets a good view of public television's concept of balance from the special program on the election that was broadcast the night after the election, Nov. 8. One of the features of the program was an interview with six "typical" voters. Four of the six had voted for Sen. McGovern!

Merrill Pannitt, editor of TV Guide, pointed out last January that Europeans get a horrible picture of America on their television from documentaries imported from the U.S. Mr. Pannitt said America is seen "as imperialistic and warlike . . . . It is described as a place where blacks live in near slavery. . . . It is alleged to be plagued with poverty . . . ."

Mr. Pannitt mentioned four specific documentaries that contributed to this distorted view of America in Europe. Two of the four-"Who Invited Us?" and "Attica"-were the products of public television.

Recently Accuracy in Media analyzed the record of an interview program hosted by Martin Agronsky which is aired by the Eastern Educational Network, a group of public television stations. We found that over a two month period 89% of the programs featured guests who were wholly or predominantly liberal or anti-administration. Only 10% featured guests who were wholly or predominantly pro-administration or conservative. The host himself is liberal and anti-administration and his active participation increases the imbalance even more.

ABRAHAM H. KALISH
Executive Secretary
Accuracy in Media Inc.

Washington