

# WABC-TV

September 8, 2008

Jeanne Mariani-Belding  
National President  
ASIAN AMERICAN JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATION  
1182 Market Street  
Suite 320  
San Francisco, CA 94102

Dear Ms. Mariani-Belding,

Is it reasonable to expect that you, as the president of one of America's pre-eminent journalism associations, should have a basic command of the facts before lecturing a colleague on the merits of being accurate? Isn't it logical to presume that you would have a fundamental appreciation for the culture of the people you represent?

Perhaps you can imagine how puzzled I was to receive your letter of August 12th.

Sikhism, regarded as the world's fifth largest organized religion, is properly pronounced "SICKH-ism." A follower of Sikhism is a Sikh, which is pronounced "sikh." The pronunciation of Sikh as "seek" is not uncommon, of course, but it is considered improper and unenlightened. "Seek" is the Anglicized pronunciation of Sikh, and owes its origins to the troubled era of British colonialism. For that reason, many Sikhs find it offensive to be called a "seek."

It is odd that you would not know any of this. And it is appalling that you would send such an audacious letter, copied to WABC-TV's management, without having your facts straight. Your posting it on the World Wide Web amounts to an unwarranted, self-aggrandizing public scold.

Had you conducted even the simplest twenty-first century search, you would have uncovered countless credible pronunciation references in Google.

I have reported on New York's Sikh community twice this year and WABC-TV has been commended for its coverage by local Sikh leaders, who were particularly gratified that we had the sophistication to pronounce the name of their religion properly. Clearly, the viewers who objected to my pronunciation of the word "Sikh" are not Sikhs.

In your condescending attempt to enlighten me and score public relations points for the Asian American Journalists Association, you have, instead, embarrassed yourself and undermined the credibility of your organization.



Mariani-Belding, AAJA

It is especially insulting because I have spent my journalistic career promoting racial and ethnic tolerance and cultural sensitivity, whether on the streets of New York City or on assignment overseas. I am scrupulous in this regard, which is why I learned the proper pronunciation of Sikh many years ago. My reputation, with my viewers and among my peers, is no less important to me than being accurate in my reporting.

Therefore, it is my expectation that this letter will prompt a timely, written, public apology from you, copied to Rebecca Campbell, President and General Manager of WABC-TV, and Kenny Plotnik, WABC-TV's Vice President and News Director. Since you have posted your original letter on the AAJA's website, fairness demands that you publish your apology in a similarly prominent manner.

You should include an acknowledgement from the Association that my proper pronunciation of Sikh was an obligatory gesture of respect to the Sikh community, rather than an ignorant and insensitive gaffe.

Sincerely,



N. J. Burkett, Correspondent  
*Eyewitness News*

cc:

Rene M. Astudillo, Executive Director, AAJA  
Janice Lee, Deputy Executive Director, AAJA  
Rebecca Campbell, President and General Manager, WABC-TV  
Kenny Plotnik, Vice President and News Director, WABC-TV  
Amardeep Singh, National Executive Director, The Sikh Coalition  
Neha Singh, Western Regional Director, The Sikh Coalition  
Paul Russell, AmeriCorps VISTA, The Sikh Coalition, New York