

Media panel goes yawn and yawn



**ED
BARK**
TELEVISION

Moderator Bill Blackburn's blabber, and some blah questions from the studio audience, helped ruin another one of those media accountability shows the other night.

Channel 13's *On The Record*, telecast live Sunday

night opposite Joaquin Andujar's tantrums in the World Series, was a show in search of a referee who would allow the participants to play the game. But Blackburn continually blew his whistle, stopping much of the action in its tracks. Isn't there a moderator anywhere who simply will shut up and let the sparks fly?

Blackburn, a former city council member and occasional political analyst on Channel 5, tried to stage-manage six participants, which is at least two too many for a program of this type.

John Bloom came to defend the honor of his redneck creation, Joe Bob Briggs. Will Jarrett, executive editor of the *Dallas Times Herald*, was an announced panelist, but he sent a lieutenant, assistant managing editor David Eden, to explain why the newspaper canceled the Briggs column.

Channel 8 news director Marty Haag found himself facing off with Waco District Attorney Vic Feazell, who says he is considering filing suit against the station for a series of reports that claimed his office has gone easy on a number of drunken drivers and drug peddlers. Feazell was a late substitution for former Texas Speaker of the House Billy Clayton.

The other panelists were Channel 8 news manager Paula Walker, current president of the Dallas chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, and Ned Schnurman, former managing editor of the canceled PBS series *Inside Story*.

On The Record began with a poll — most of these shows do — that showed the public losing confidence in newspaper and television news reporting. OK, so what about Joe Bob? Jarrett announced the cancellation of his column after about 300 angry blacks went to the *Times Herald* to protest Bloom's now infamous "We Are The Weird" parody of USA For Africa, written under the Joe Bob byline.

Asked about this, Eden said that he and other "senior editors" determined that the Briggs column had faltered "for some months" and was "not as successful in terms of its execution as it had been." Joe Bob, he said, had chosen to pick on the powerless rather than the powerful.

Bloom, who contended that a "mob came into the paper," said the column was "canceled largely because of a big misunderstanding."

Blackburn then cut him off and asked Haag a windy, rambling question about the "spiritual values" of reporters and their perceived liberal bias.

Walker later returned to the "We Are The Weird" issue, contending that Joe Bob never joked about "Jews in ovens" because the Jewish community in Dallas is "very strong, well-organized and well-placed, whereas blacks I think are seen as sort of stragglers."

"Joe Bob's made many Jewish jokes," Bloom replied. "Not Jews in ovens, but . . ." Blackburn cut him off and went to questions from the audience.

Answering a question from Dallas County Commissioner John Wiley Price, Bloom said, "It's only here . . . that I'm harangued as a racist. In other cities it's just good ol' boy Joe Bob Briggs walkin' down the street."

Feazell, given his turn, said that Channel 8 reporter Charles Duncan's investigation of him "smacks of Hitler's big lie."

Haag replied that Feazell "isn't this poor, beleaguered district attorney sitting down there in Waco with no access to the media."

Again, Blackburn diverted the discussion by taking questions from the audience. Two audience members chose to make long statements on unrelated matters. It was left to Channel 13 staffer Stan Matthews, executive producer of *On The Record*, to save his program from further boredom. From the audience, Matthews asked Feazell why he refused to talk to Channel 8. Haag, in turn, was asked why Duncan wouldn't talk to *D* magazine, which has a lengthy article on the matter in this month's issue.

Feazell said he wouldn't cooperate because he had heard Duncan was out to get him.

Haag said Duncan wouldn't talk to *D* in part because the magazine seemed out to get Channel 8.

Schnurman made the most sense when he said it was "unpardonable" for Duncan to stiff *D*.

Blackburn tossed in a caveat about how we "live in an imperfect society."

It was time to yawn again.