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Fezell Says Reports Untrue, May Still Sue

By CAMELIA FOSTER

"On the Record" a live television show produced by and shown on KERA-TV, public television station in Dallas, included a segment on the investigative reporting by Charles Duncan and his resulting 10 segments shown on WFAA-TV in Dallas that dealt with McLennan County District Attorney Vic Fezell.

"Media Accountability" was the topic for the segment. Narrated by Bill Blackburn, attorney and former Dallas City Councilman, on the Sunday night show. In part the panelists looked at the press and public officials.

Duncan in his series had stated that DA Fezell was going easy on driving while intoxicated arrests in the county.

Asked if the media was "to harsh". Fezell answered, "there is no way to characterize the media as a whole. In the past in Waco you could talk with the editor, then Channel 8 came in and had total disregard of the truth and used opinions versus facts...it smacks of Hitler's lies."

Asked if he would encourage young people to enter the realm of public service, Fezell said, "I would discourage young people at this time."

Fezell said he was receiving about 15 calls each day that Duncan was in town doing interviews concerning the manner in which he (Duncan) conducted them and the callers telling him the reporter was not looking for the truth.

Ned Schnurman, originator of the program "Inside Story," asked Fezell if he told his story to the other media and "that public officials can sue for libel and you as the DA did not do that."

It was also pointed out that Fezell refused to be interviewed by Duncan for the series and that Duncan had refused to be interviewed by "D" magazine for an article written by Carlton Stowers, with his critical of Duncan's reporting.

"I want to make some points," Marty Haag, WFAA-TV Channel 8

news director said, "Fezell isn't a poor beleaguered DA sitting down in Waco, with no access to the media. The Waco television stations, the Waco newspapers have told his story."

"Asked if he had gotten crossways with Jim Adams Director of the Texas Department of Public Safety and the Texas Rangers with his investigation of the Henry Lee Lucas investigations? Fezell replied, the county grand jury messed up a lot of Lucas's confessions and police reports."

In response to the statement that he had not sued for libel, Fezell said he was still considering a lawsuit but had been involved in a capital murder trial for the past two months.

Fezell was also asked how the public could get his story if he refused to talk with the reporters.

"Just because I am an elected official I don't have to answer if a reporter comes after me."

The DA also pointed out that Duncan had used some local television tape taken in 1982 that quoted him as saying his campaign had been expensive. Fezell charged the remarks were taken out of context and used by Duncan in the DWI allegations of wrong doing.

Haag said, "it is the duty of the press to investigate public officials."

Schnurman noted that the press is "thin skinned," and he also stated that the wealthy and powerful have more access to the media.

Haag reminded the DA and the patrol that Fezell was granted two minutes, at his (Fezell's request) to respond to the series which he did.

Blackburn began the program with remarks stating the media had taken some severe drops in confidence by the public in recent surveys.

He noted that in 1979, 51% of the people interviewed believed what they read in the newspapers and 38% what they saw on television. However in 1984 that had dropped to 34% for newspapers and 26% for television news.