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To Some, Jackson Trial Is Another Shot at TV

By [JOHN M. BRODER](#)

 ANTA MARIA, Calif. - Anne Bremner has taken unpaid time off from her Seattle law practice to sit in the courtroom and offer television commentary on the Michael Jackson trial. The visibility the case has given her, she said, has meant millions of dollars of new business for her firm.

Jim Hammer, a former prosecutor in San Francisco who hopes to one day make a living as a lawyer on television, migrated south after the Scott Peterson trial and has signed on with Fox News Channel to analyze the Jackson case.

Bob Massi, a well-coiffed civil litigator from Las Vegas who is also under contract to analyze the Jackson case for Fox, says his television work has been a blessing as well as a curse for his private practice.

"On the one hand, people know who you are," said Mr. Massi, who got his television start on a local station doing a segment called "Legalese" that blossomed into coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial and other prominent cases. "But some think you're too high profile and expensive. I think it's made a difference, but I don't think my income went up just because I was doing TV."

Drawn by the flame of the klieg lights and the television money that powers them, lawyer-commentators have been a fixture at widely publicized trials at least since William Kennedy Smith was tried and acquitted of rape in Palm Beach, Fla., in 1991. The tribulations of O. J. Simpson, Kobe Bryant, Scott Peterson and now Michael Jackson have brought this traveling band of analysts to the media bivouacs that spring up around America's celebrity show trials.

Greta Van Susteren, who cut her television teeth on Mr. Smith's trial and then gained nationwide fame covering Mr. Simpson's trial, was one of the trailblazers and remains the Platonic ideal of the talking head, with a law degree and her own television show. (Plato himself, who offered expert commentary on Socrates' bombshell trial in 399 B.C., would have been the first, except there was no cable back then.)

"People have been fascinated by trials since the beginning of time," Ms. Van Susteren, now host of "On the Record" on Fox News Channel, said in a telephone interview. "After the William Kennedy Smith trial, CNN recognized that this legal stuff is interesting and actually quite simple. If you can understand a sporting event, you can understand a trial."

Some of the sideline analysts at Mr. Jackson's trial are familiar from previous spectacles. Jim Moret, who is covering the trial as senior correspondent for the syndicated program "Inside Edition," was the studio anchor for CNN's coverage of Mr. Simpson's trial.

Diane Dimond of Court TV, who is not a lawyer, is among the nation's foremost experts on Mr. Jackson's personal and legal issues and is reporting around the clock from a tent pitched in the driveway of the Santa Maria courthouse. Ms. Dimond's credits include the Smith trial, the Simpson case, the impeachment of President Bill Clinton and Bush v. Gore, the legal thriller that decided the 2000 presidential election.

Marcia Clark, who led the prosecution's case against Mr. Simpson, has appeared here occasionally to analyze the Jackson trial for "Entertainment Tonight." With a new hairstyle and a youthful look, she enlivened the courtroom at a preliminary hearing last year when her navel ring set off the courthouse metal detector.

Laurie Levenson, a professor at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles who has become an expert on celebrity and crime, has shown up for big moments in the Jackson trial and is readily available for television interviews. A colleague of hers at Loyola, Stanley Goldman, is the legal affairs editor for Fox News and a frequent contributor to the network's Jackson coverage. Ms. Levenson is a former prosecutor, Mr. Goldman a former public defender, but neither has been a predictable shill for either side in this case.

The Jackson trial has also provided a venue for lesser-known lawyers and courthouse denizens to break into the crimecaster industry. Its extremely tight security offers a ready-made platform for television commentary inside the courthouse complex at a spot dubbed Hyde Park, after the site of the famous speakers' corner in London.

Peter Shaplen, a freelance television producer who has served as media coordinator for the Peterson and Jackson trials, set up a microphone just outside the courtroom for analysts to use during the three short breaks in the testimony each day. There a revolving cast of talking heads offers up comment on the proceedings. The video is made available to the networks participating in a pool arrangement, which explains why Ms. Bremner or Mr. Moret, say, may show up on two or three different networks in a single day.

"Hyde Park feeds the beast," Mr. Shaplen said. "But I also think in an odd way it makes the coverage better. If you can hear commentary from people who just came out of court, highly qualified people, it improves the coverage across the board."

Ms. Bremner, a former sex crimes prosecutor in Seattle and now a partner at the law firm Stafford Frey Cooper, has flown down to Santa Maria almost every week since the jury began hearing testimony nearly five weeks ago.

Wearing a distinctive long blond ponytail, Ms. Bremner has appeared on Court TV, Fox News, MSNBC and CNN; she said she prefers the freedom of being able to speak to anyone at any time to the lucrative security of a network contract.

"Trials are like public morality plays," Ms. Bremner said. "And there's a public-education aspect to it, in this case more so than in many others."

She said the Jackson case had provided an occasion to debate a state law on sex crimes cases that allowed the introduction of evidence of past offenses, even if they were not reported or prosecuted. The case has also illumined the vulnerability of a celebrity suspect to possible swindlers or to a prosecutor on a mission, she said.

Mr. Hammer, the former prosecutor from San Francisco, is covering the trial for Fox News after getting his start at the Peterson trial. He gained some fame and television exposure as the lead prosecutor in the murder case against a woman who owned Presa Canario dogs that fatally mauled a neighbor in 2001.

Mr. Hammer, whose military appearance belies a puckish sense of humor, said he was following the lead of Ms. Van Susteren and hoped to one day occupy a chair like hers on one of the networks. "Greta's a real lawyer," he said, comparing her with some of the freelance commentators in Santa Maria. "Some of these other people up here no one's ever heard of."

Some analysts appear to have been hired because of their connections to the prosecution or the defense. NBC has contracted Jim Thomas, the former sheriff of Santa Barbara County, to analyze the trial. Mr. Thomas, who worked closely for years with Thomas W. Sneddon Jr., the Santa Barbara district attorney who is leading the Jackson prosecution, offers insight from the perspective of law enforcement officers and prosecutors.

NBC has also contracted Ronald Richards, who describes himself as a "professional friend" of Thomas A. Mesereau Jr., Mr. Jackson's chief defense lawyer. Mr. Richards said he tried to be neutral but added that the network hired him because of his expertise on criminal defense issues. "I was never a prosecutor," he said.

He also said that working the Jackson case was costing him money but that he did not mind.

"The exposure is good, and it's nice taking a break from clients and all their problems," Mr. Richards said. "I like breaking down complicated issues into a simplistic format. Plus, my mom and grandma love watching. That's why I do it."

Mr. Richards said no one but a blockhead did legal commentary without being paid. "I don't understand these lawyers who come up here and do it for free," he said. "I guess some people are addicted to the camera. It's like a shot of heroin. If they think it's good for their legal business, they're just rationalizing their addiction."

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