

Police wrong to freeze out media



The press often helps to catch publicity-seeking killers,
ALLAN BONNER writes

Chief Charles Moose of Maryland's Montgomery County police force has a history of shouting at reporters, blowing up at news conferences and refusing to answer questions. He has every right to be mad — he's just mad at the wrong people. He should be mad at the sniper.

Instead of sarcastically suggesting that the media solve this crime, he should plug the leaks among his own fellow officers, one of whom told reporters that a tarot card was found at a shooting scene.

'Many serial killers want the spotlight so badly they leave clues to get caught, as in this case. Smoking the sniper out could save lives.'

Media transgressions are nothing compared with the dozens of "witnesses" who deliver fake reports, consuming millions of dollars and dozens of hours of police time. Even the Pentagon wasn't outside with local police who wanted secrecy, when it issued a news release revealing use of surveillance planes in the case. Then there are the dozens of women who set the police on their ex-husbands in order to add a little extra, post-divorce punishment.

The flamboyant chief has been ordered to take sensitivity courses before in his career, and a little media training now might stop the sniper quicker. The chief should

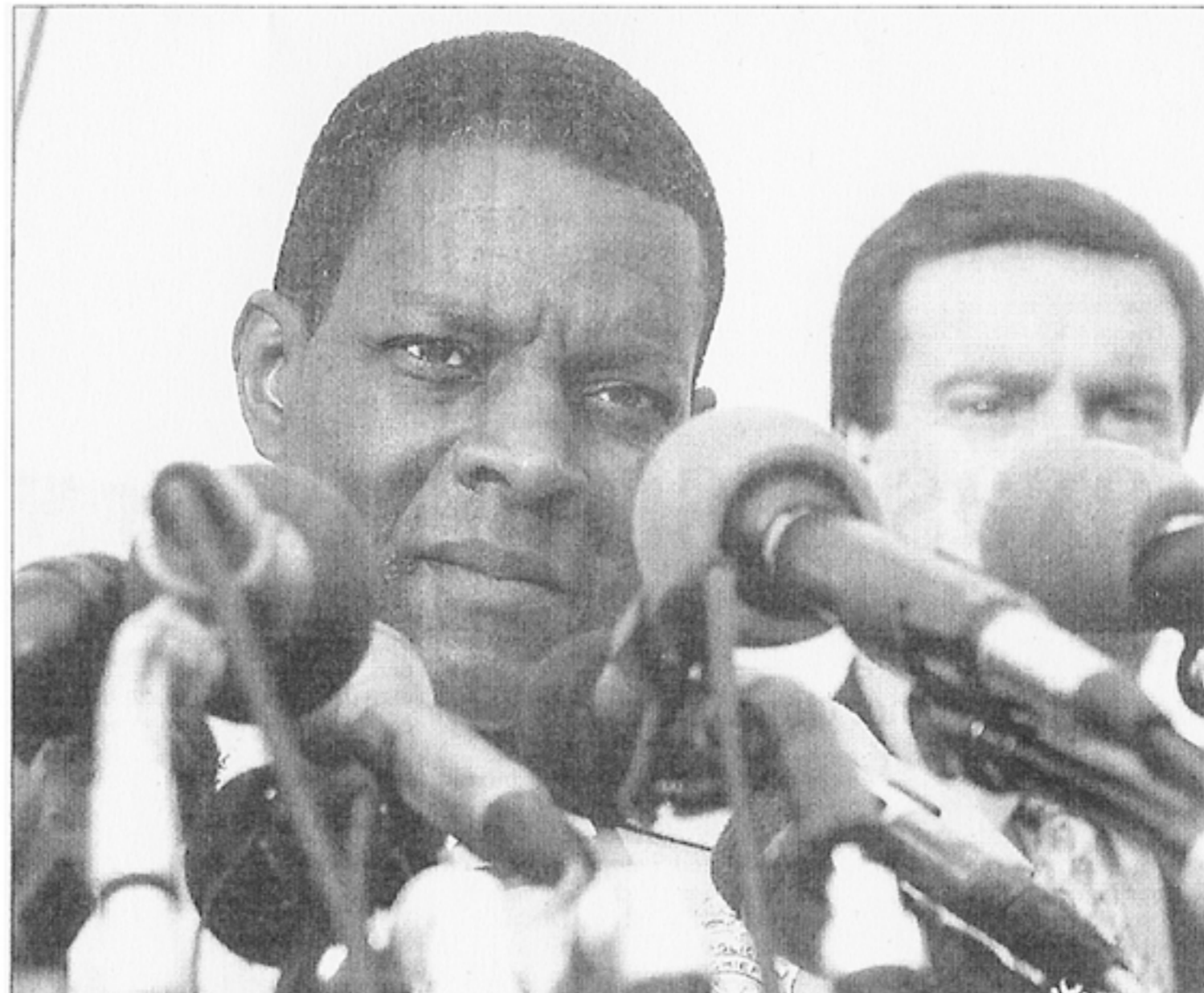
bear in mind that murder cases involving publicity-seeking killers are often resolved, rather than spoiled, because of the media.

To get officers to understand their common purpose with reporters, I used to begin media and crisis management classes that I taught at the Canadian Police College by describing journalists. "They're hard-drinking, partying types who use secret sources, occasionally skew the evidence to achieve their goals and love intrigue. Cops have nothing in common with that sort, do they?"

As an occasional consultant to the police, two points I continue to make to municipal forces in Canada and the United States are: You're in the information gathering business just like journalists; and you need them as much as they need you.

In the past, Chief Moose has angrily accused reporters of putting "officers in danger" by their coverage of a hostage taking. There are also many documented cases of the media saving lives by showing terrorists there's no hope of escape. Police are grateful in those cases. Moreover, on any given day police officers are rightly trying to plant stories with the media in order to further police work. Law enforcement can't have it both ways — their best hope is competence in dealing with the legitimate role of news reporters in a democracy.

Those who bemoan the cumbersome media should recall that there are only about a dozen countries in the world that have a history and tradition of changing their governments without violence and bloodshed. A free press is an integral part of that tradition



Chief Charles Moose of Maryland's Montgomery County police force, left, and Montgomery County Executive Douglas Duncan say little to the media during press conferences.

— warts and all.

There may be cryptic messages for the sniper in the chief's poor media relations. But it doesn't seem logical to hold a news conference to say he "won't take no questions on no topic."

Arguing with reporters does as much good as arguing with the cop as she's writing you a ticket; they're just doing their job. Some news makers take the risk of bringing reporters into their confidence — and it often works. In the Tylenol poisonings, the drug maker confided that there was cyanide

kept on the company's premises for quality control. Reporters agreed to keep that secret because none was missing (confirming that it could not have been an inside job) and the company was trying to fight a terrorist who had killed several people through product tampering. The New York Times knew of the Kennedy administration's plans to invade Cuba and kept quiet. The media-savvy president (a former journalist) pressured editors by publicly enticing them to ask not only the question "Is it news?" but also the chilling

"Is it in the national interest?"

How to use the media to help catch someone spreading terror? Years ago in New York City someone was dropping items from a high-rise housing project and terrorizing construction workers and passersby. Rather than blaming the media or calling the perpetrator "sick" or the more morally neutral "cowardly," a police psychologist did his homework. Old news reports showed that many low-income families had been displaced to make way for the high rise. The psychologist's

good guess was that the perpetrator viewed himself as Robin Hood avenging wrongs for the powerless. Police began a campaign to dislodge the terrorist from his self-image. They published an ugly looking composite (despite not knowing what he looked like) and a description that speculated he had no friends, trouble with women and smelled. The violence ended, probably because few people, including murderers, want to be publicly painted as inept and smelly.

Washington-area police could ponder how the sniper could possibly bolster his (her or their) self-image through these heinous crimes. Could the sniper be righting an old wrong, such as failure in the military? Could he be sending a message about the United States' vulnerability to terrorism?

Authorities could then use the media to communicate with the sniper.

They could say how anxious they are to learn from him or how powerful a point he's made. Many serial killers want the spotlight so badly they leave clues to get caught, as in this case. Smoking the sniper out could save lives.

An American commission on freedom of the press after World War II stated that news was "full access to the day's intelligence." Society is usually better off with more information, not less.

Chief Moose is sworn to keep the peace and security of his community. He might read Thomas Jefferson who said "the only security of all is in a free press." Good media relations is part of good police work.

Allan Bonner is a Toronto-based researcher who teaches at the Centre for Training in Risk and Crisis Management. His latest book on media will be published in early 2003.

allan@allanbonner.com