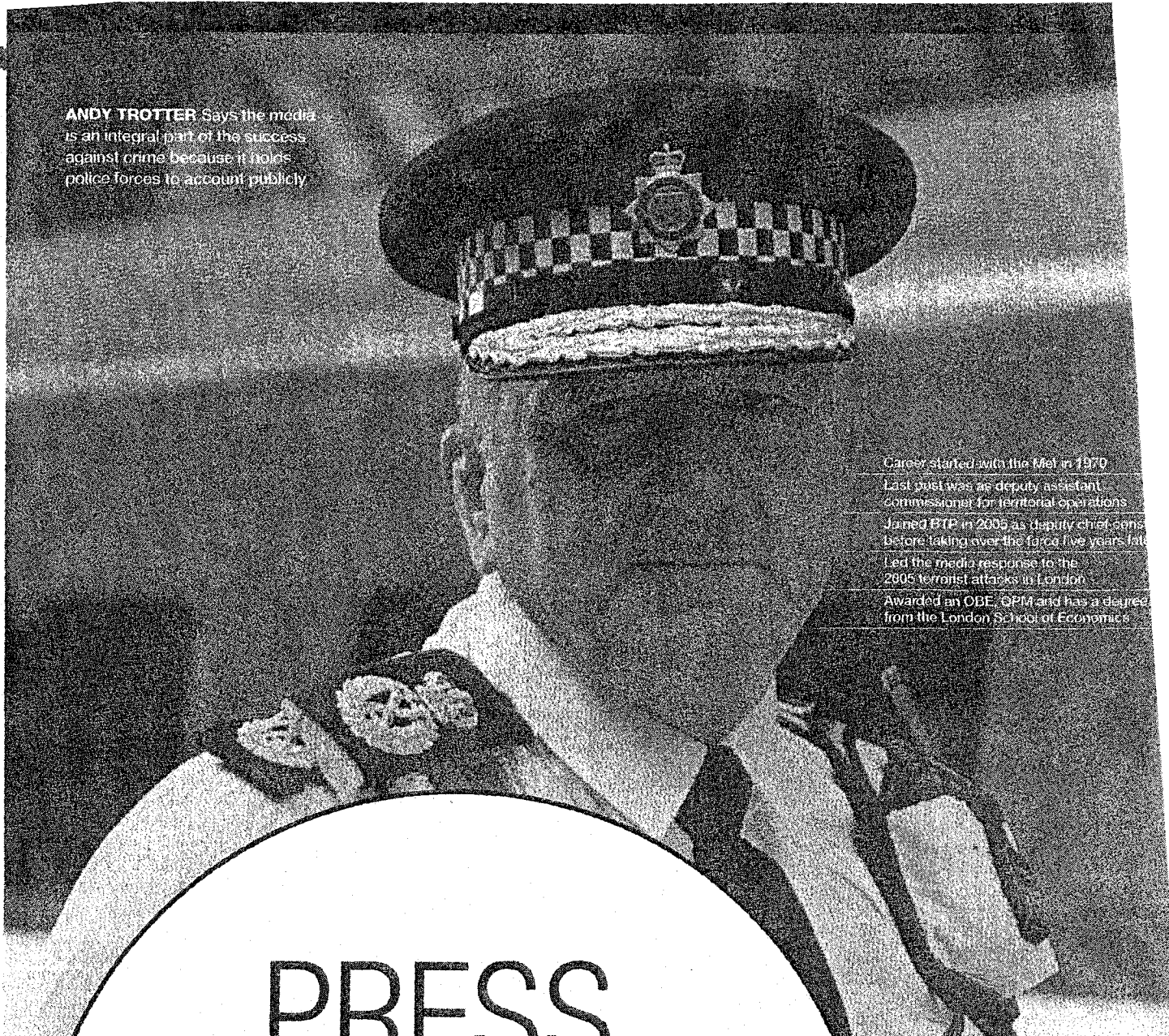


ANDY TROTTER Says the media is an integral part of the success against crime because it holds police forces to account publicly



Career started with the Met in 1979
Last post was as deputy assistant commissioner for territorial operations
Joined BTP in 2005 as deputy chief constable before taking over the force five years later
Led the media response to the 2005 terrorist attacks in London
Awarded an OBE, CPM and has a degree from the London School of Economics

PRESS ASSOCIATION

With increased pressure on the police for transparency, Andy Trotter, chairman of the ACPO communications advisory group and chief constable of the British Transport Police, talks to **Hollie Clemence** about the relationship between police and media

Q Do you think the police service gets a fair deal in the media?

A We need the media to help us with our investigations. They are an integral part of our success against crime. They have to hold us to account publicly and pursue the public interest. All those things are very positive.

Our reputation is made, like it or not, through the media. I often say to officers: 'You might have done a brilliant job but if the world thinks you didn't, then you didn't.' The government's view of us, the world's view of us is formed through things they see on the screen or read in print.

The way that the police and public sector generally are being dealt with is unfortunate. We are all grown up. We understand the need to cut costs but that should not include denigrating public services, and the police in particular, on the way. For all of our faults, I absolutely believe the police service nationally is in the best condition it has ever been, but this is not reflected in the media.

Some newspapers will never be happy with the fact that crime has gone down. It has got to

be doom and gloom and disaster. It has got to be cheap headlines around some [officer] misdemeanor or whatever, missing, as they always do, that crime is down, detections are high and prisons are full of people put there by the police.

Q Last August, you reissued guidance to remind forces that officers do not have the power to delete journalists' photographs. Why do you think some officers misunderstood the rules in the first place?

A Police officers and community support officers have been trained to look out for suspicious behaviour. Somehow this transformed into anyone with a camera and I think some officers misunderstood what people can and cannot photograph. This became a strange sort of internal police myth that every time you see someone with a camera, you have a legitimate reason to stop them.

This was a complete misuse of power. Professional and amateur snappers are actually our friends. They are our eyes and ears and it is quite ridiculous that they should be stopped. Officers lost the ability to go up to somebody and just talk to them, a key part of street policing skills. It is while you are chatting, you can eliminate any suspicions and it should be an innate skill of a good police officer.

Q Is there a risk that the myth could take hold again, with officers on high alert following the death of Osama Bin Laden?

A We know from [the 7 July 2005 attacks on the London transport system] that terrorists reconnoiter. It is perfectly possible that people will be out there with cameras checking and planning, but terrorists are not going to stand there in full public gaze taking photographs. One can take photographs very easily and covertly with modern equipment without ever being seen. However, people standing around taking pictures of the Houses of Parliament or a police station are not usually in the business of planning a terrorist attack.

Q Do you think officers are under more pressure as media scrutiny has become more intense over the years?

A I have always said police officers should behave as if their every word and action is being recorded [on or off duty] so that they are never ashamed to have repeated what they have said or what they have done. Those words are even more pertinent now when words and actions are even more likely to be recorded. We are professional police officers; we are able to resist threats and verbal abuse and use the law properly. If people need to be arrested and force needs to be used, we will use it appropriately. I try to take the view that whatever my officers or I am doing I would not be ashamed of seeing that on the television and nor should they be.

Q Paul Lewis, the Guardian reporter who brought to light the video of Ian Tomlinson being shoved to the ground during the G20 riots, has said individuals within the Met told the newspaper to 'lay off' the story. What were your thoughts on that?

A It is difficult to comment on the precise nature of that. Quite clearly, Paul Lewis is an excellent investigative reporter and has done a remarkably good job in bringing some of these things to the public notice and has been commended for so doing. Equally, I do not put a negative spin on everything that police officers may

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or may not have said. There may have been perfectly good reasons for whichever officer from whichever force made that request. I do not see a conspiracy around every corner.

Clearly, these things will come out in due course in the appropriate arena. I do not subscribe to the notion that there was some immediate move to cover anything up. [The Independent Police Complaints Commission investigation found no evidence that anyone involved in the police media handling connected to this incident set out to deliberately mislead.] We know from our own investigations of our own officers, without any involvement of the media, that we are pretty ruthless about investigating our own. I do not think that there is a profession in the country that has anything like the rigour of internal investigations that the police do.

Q So is there ever an excuse for the police to put pressure on a journalist not to pursue a story like this one?

A Not at all. To get public confidence we must be as open as possible no matter what pain that causes us.

Q What were your views on Avon and Somerset Constabulary banning ITV journalists from a press conference about murder of

Bristol architect Joanna Yeates in January after it deemed their reporting 'unfair, naive and irresponsible'?

A There were lessons to learn on both sides. There are lessons to learn for the police about dealing with the sheer volume of media that turn up and their demands. And there are lessons for the media to learn about the way they behave.

Having seen the footage, I think the biggest punishment ITV could have had is if [their report] was replayed at the press conference. That would be sufficient to show that it was not, in my opinion, a good piece of journalism and was unhelpful to a force that was doing an excellent job in its investigation.

Avon and Somerset were entirely within their rights to do what they did. The danger of banning anyone is that you do the very rare thing of uniting journalists, which is not a good idea. I would not ban journalists myself or encourage others to do it but each chief constable is entitled to do what they want to do.

Q Nick Herbert, police minister, last month publicly criticised chief constables for 'bursting out' in the national press 'giving us the benefit of their latest opinion'. Is the national press a suitable place for chiefs to air their views on the government's cuts?

A I do not believe we should carry out a discussion in the media. The media has no interest in our welfare. I have always felt that if we want to argue with government we should disagree and argue in the appropriate forum. It is not a criticism of those who have spoken out. Equally, I think the vilification of those who have spoken out is in itself wrong as well but my own style is to have my discussions in the appropriate forum and not use the newspapers to try and get my point across.

Q If you had one wish to improve the relationship between the media and the police, what would it be?

A My wish would be for the return of the specialist crime journalist who really knew their stuff and had the time to understand policing and crime; who understood the court process; and who could read more than the first few lines of an executive summary.

From the police side, no one can say that they do not want to deal with the media anymore. That is not allowed. Whatever rank or level you are, it is a prerequisite for what we do.

When I see agendas for senior investigating officer meetings and I see media at number 10 on the list, I think, 'No, media should be number two priority.' It is not just how you deal with a crowd of journalists. It is about the Home Secretary on the phone to you because of what they have just seen on Sky TV. The speed of movement is so fast. That insatiable demand of 24-hour media knows no boundaries. ■