

## Obama Image Machine Whirs as Press Access Narrows

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#### WASHINGTON

A photo of the Obamas hugging that was released on Election Day 2012 has become the world's most popular tweet on Twitter. A dressed-up version of Barack Obama's State of the Union speech, packed with charts and graphs, is huge on YouTube. A playful picture of the president cavorting with a 3-year-old in a Spiderman costume is a favorite online.

It's all courtesy of the Obama image machine, serving up a stream of words, images and videos that invariably cast the president as commanding, compassionate and on the ball. In this world, Obama's family is always photogenic, first dog Bo is always well-behaved and the vegetables in the South Lawn kitchen garden always seem succulent.

You'll have to look elsewhere for bloopers, bobbles or contrary points of view.

Capitalizing on the possibilities of the digital age, the Obama White House is generating its own content like no president before, and refining its media strategies in the second term in hopes of telling a more compelling story than in the first.

At the same time, it is limiting press access in ways that past administrations wouldn't have dared, and the president is answering to the public in more controlled settings than his predecessors. It's raising new questions about what's lost when the White House tries to make an end run around the media, functioning, in effect, as its own news agency.

Mike McCurry, who served as press secretary to President Bill Clinton, sees an inclination by the Obama White House to "self-publish," coupled with tactics "I never would have dreamed of in terms of restricting access" for independent news organizations.

"What gets lost are those revealing moments when the president's held accountable by the representatives of the public who are there in the form of the media," says McCurry.

Obama himself took note of complaints about limited access in his jokes last month at the Gridiron dinner, an annual event where political leaders, journalists and media executives poke fun at one another.

"Some of you have said that I'm ignoring the Washington press corps, that we're too controlling," Obama said. "You know what, you were right. I was wrong and I want to apologize — in a video you can watch exclusively at [whitehouse.gov](http://whitehouse.gov)."

Three days later, it was no laughing matter when the White House live-streamed on the Internet Obama's meeting with his export council and allowed just one reporter in the room.

Still, the White House rejects the notion that it is turning to new media it can control at the expense of the old, instead describing an all-of-the-above strategy.

"From press conferences to interviews with national, regional and constituency press, to new social media platforms, we have worked to both expand the scope of communication and also deepen the level of engagement between the American people and the work of the White House," says Jamie Smith, deputy press secretary.

Statistics compiled by Martha Kumar, a political science professor at Towson University in Maryland who studies presidential communication, show how Obama's strategy has differed from his predecessors'.

In his first term, Obama engaged in 107 short question-and-answer sessions with reporters during events in the Oval Office, the Cabinet Room and similar settings. President George W. Bush, by contrast, had 354.

By the same token, though, Obama held twice as many solo press conferences as Bush: 36 compared to 17. And in the first term Obama did 674 interviews — TV, radio, Internet, print — compared to 217 for Bush and 191 for Clinton.

With interviews, the president has more power to choose his timing, questioners and format, in hopes of delivering a certain message in a setting that's not always hard-hitting. In impromptu Q-and-A's, the questions fly about anything and everything from the national press corps — and these wide-open opportunities to challenge the president on the events of the day have become increasingly rare.

Even in regional interviews, though, Obama can and does sometimes get asked about breaking or embarrassing news of the day.

"There's no question that he's opening and closing the door at his choice," says Gerald Shuster, a professor of political communication at the University of Pittsburgh. "He's controlling the flow as much as he can."

The will for presidents to get their story out without media intervention has always been there.

What's different now, says Mark Jurkowitz of the Pew Research Project for Excellence in Journalism, is new technology that allow the White House to distribute its own content far more widely and effectively than past presidents could. At the same time, it's getting harder for cash-strapped news outlets to resist using photos, video and other content supplied by the White House.

Obama's strategy is part of a broader mass communications trend in which politicians, corporate leaders and others in public life are using digital tools to send their messages directly to the public without a media filter.

"It's all about control," says Eric Dezenhall, an image consultant who has worked for years with politicians, celebrities and business people.

"Why put your CEO on '60 Minutes' when he can record something that appears on the corporate website? That way he can't be accused of not commenting but he doesn't have to stand up to the withering scrutiny you might face in an investigative TV show."

Obama's communications strategy works well for him, Dezenhall says, but sometimes at the expense of the "rowdy, boisterous scrutiny that the free press is based on."

So it was that when defeated presidential candidate Mitt Romney met with Obama for lunch at the White House after the 2012 election, there was no press access. The only photo was a White House handout that showed the two men talking in the Oval Office, clearly the president's turf. And when bipartisan congressional leaders met with Obama for crucial budget talks in November 2010, the only coverage was a White House photo showing the president with his hand on the shoulder of Republican Rep. Eric Cantor as other lawmakers stood by, the president at center stage.

When the president got complaints that his live-streamed meeting with his export council was open to just one reporter, Press Secretary Jay Carney responded: "Everyone in America with electricity and a computer could see it."

That's true, but the lone White House camera offered just one view.

And while plenty of news organizations cover the president's State of the Union address, the commentary that accompanies the White House's "enhanced" version is more one-sided.

When viewers choose the White House as their news source, "what people are being exposed to is highly selective," says Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center. "They're not getting the balance of the alternative points of view. They're not getting the criticism that asks, 'Is this accurate?' It's not being put in historical context."

Jamieson says the White House-generated content can be highly seductive, particularly when people feel they're developing a "direct relationship" with White House officials who send out chatty mass emails and solicit feedback through social media.

Democratic and Republican veterans of the White House alike say it makes sense for the Obama administration to maximize its use of digital advances to communicate directly to the public, but they warn that something is missing when "the administration's feet are not held to the fire" in certain settings, in the words of Ari Fleischer, who served as White House press secretary under Bush.

Kumar, the Towson professor, warns that the administration can even delude itself if it puts too much emphasis on self-reinforcing content.

"They start believing what they're creating," she says. "They need to hear a lot of voices and they need to hear them early."

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