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Obama pushes the limits of media exposure

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The Obama administration is responding to unfavorable trends in public opinion polls by intensifying its message discipline and seizing as many opportunities for publicity as the schedule allows.

President Barack Obama on Wednesday taped a series of exclusive interviews for different ABC News platforms, all highlighting health care reform — a day after a major news conference also addressed health care.

Although 72 percent in a recent CBS News/New York Times poll said they supported health care reform, three different polls have shown support waning for Obama's fiscal policies. The administration is not taking any chances on losing the health care fight.

“The discipline from this administration is somewhat legendary,” said Jim McGrath, a Republican communications consultant and former White House press staffer. “At some point, he risks overexposure, but right now it's working and that is probably all they are looking at.”

Obama's ABC News tour — derided by critics such as the Cato Institute as an “infomercial” — follows a two-day CBS News project highlighting his family on Father's Day, with a follow-up interview about his presidency.

NBC News won huge ratings for its special, two-night report behind the scenes at the White House — illustrating how the commercial interests of television can dovetail with the administration's political interests.

The president's message discipline takes many forms, from his reliance on using a teleprompter in public and prepared note cards in meetings, to keeping a busy schedule of high-profile events geared at pushing the agenda — most recently, a campaign to include a public option in health care reform.

At his news conference this week, Obama controlled the message by choosing the questioners — skipping over journalists from major newspapers who were more likely to ask about his slipping poll numbers, in favor



President Barack Obama answers a question during a news conference at the White House in Washington. (AP)

of others such as a Huffington Post blogger who asked a prearranged question Obama wanted on Iran.

Mark Knoller, a CBS News radio correspondent and tabulator of presidential statistics, noted that since taking office, Obama has logged only seven days without a media appearance — and all but one of those days was a Sunday.

Obama's ubiquity spawned a recent rash of news stories wondering if there is a downside to overexposure for the still-popular president.

The notion that Obama likes using the spotlight crossed over from the news media into pop culture.


“You don't have to be on television every minute of every day,” HBO comedian and political talk show host Bill Maher said on his show recently. “You're the president, not a rerun of 'Law & Order.' ”

Aubrey Jewett, a political scientist at the University of Central Florida, said the administration was using its advantage while Obama was still politically popular and could still set the agenda and control the message.

Potential downsides, Jewett said, include encouraging critics who claim that by avoiding tough questions and public debate, Obama is failing to live up to his promises of transparency and accountability.

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