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Latest Word on the Trail? I Take It Back

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The quotations come back redacted, stripped of colorful metaphors, colloquial language and anything even mildly provocative.

They are sent by e-mail from the Obama headquarters in Chicago to reporters who have interviewed campaign officials under one major condition: the press office has veto power over what statements can be quoted and attributed by name.

Most reporters, desperate to pick the brains of the president's top strategists, grudgingly agree. After the interviews, they review their notes, check their tape recorders and send in the juiciest sound bites for review.

The verdict from the campaign — an operation that prides itself on staying consistently on script — is often no, Barack Obama does not approve this message.

The push and pull over what is on the record is one of journalism's perennial battles. But those negotiations typically took place case by case, free from the red pens of press minders. Now, with a millisecond Twitter news cycle and an unforgiving, gaffe-obsessed media culture, politicians and their advisers are routinely demanding that reporters allow them final editing power over any published quotations.

Quote approval is standard practice for the Obama campaign, used by many top strategists and almost all midlevel aides in Chicago and at the White House — almost anyone other than spokesmen who are paid to be quoted. (And sometimes it applies even to them.) It is also commonplace throughout Washington and on the campaign trail.

The Romney campaign insists that journalists interviewing any of Mitt Romney's five sons agree to use only quotations that are approved by the press office. And Romney advisers almost always require that reporters ask them for the green light on anything from a conversation that they would like to include in an article.

From Capitol Hill to the Treasury Department, interviews granted only with quote approval have become the default position. Those officials who dare to speak out of school, but fearful of making the slightest off-message remark, shroud even the most innocuous and anodyne quotations in anonymity by insisting they be referred to as a "top Democrat" or a "Republican strategist."

It is a double-edged sword for journalists, who are getting the on-the-record quotes they have long asked for, but losing much of the spontaneity and authenticity in their interviews.

Jim Messina, the Obama campaign manager, can be foul-mouthed. But readers would not know it because he deletes the curse words before approving his quotes. Brevity is not a strong suit of David Plouffe, a senior White House adviser. So he tightens up his sentences before giving them the O.K.

Stuart Stevens, the senior Romney strategist, is fond of disparaging political opponents by quoting authors like Walt Whitman and referring to historical figures like H. R. Haldeman, Richard Nixon's chief of staff. But such clever lines later rarely make it past Mr. Stevens.

Many journalists spoke about the editing only if granted anonymity, an irony that did not escape them. No one said the editing altered the meaning of a quote. The changes were almost always small and seemingly unnecessary, they said.

Those who did speak on the record said the restrictions seem only to be growing. "It's not something I'm particularly proud of because there's a part of me that says, 'Don't do it, don't agree to their terms,'" said Major Garrett, a correspondent for The National Journal. "There are times when this feels like I'm dealing with some of my editors. It's like, 'You just changed

this because you could!’ ”

It was difficult to find a news outlet that had not agreed to quote approval, albeit reluctantly. Organizations like Bloomberg, The Washington Post, Vanity Fair, Reuters and The New York Times have all consented to interviews under such terms.

“We don’t like the practice,” said Dean Baquet, managing editor for news at The New York Times. “We encourage our reporters to push back. Unfortunately this practice is becoming increasingly common, and maybe we have to push back harder.”

The Obama campaign declined to make Mr. Plouffe or Mr. Messina available to explain their media practices. “We are not putting anyone on the record for this story,” said Katie Hogan, an Obama spokeswoman, without a hint of irony. She pointed to the many unrestricted interviews with campaign officials every day on television and when the press corps travels with the president.

Jay Carney, the White House press secretary, said the White House has made a concerted effort to make more officials available to the news media. “We have a lot more people talking a lot more often now,” he said.

Both presidential campaigns are keenly aware of what can happen when they speak too freely. Damaging sound bites can live on in the news cycle for days. Mr. Obama’s remark last month during a televised news conference that “the private sector is doing fine” landed almost immediately in attack ads. And Eric Fehrstrom’s “Etch A Sketch” comment on CNN, about softening some of the harder positions Mr. Romney took during the primaries, continues to haunt the Romney campaign five months later.

Reporters who have covered the Obama presidency say the quote-approval process fits a pattern by this White House of finding new ways to limit its exposure in the news media.

“We realize there’s a caution and a wariness about stray comments driving the news cycle,” said Caren Bohan of Reuters, president of the White House Correspondents’ Association. “The argument we make is that if a president or a candidate is out there more, I think these things are less likely to be as glaring.”

Modern White Houses have long had “background briefings,” gatherings of top officials who speak to reporters under the condition that they are quoted anonymously. With time, the restrictions have become broader, often bordering on the absurd.

In 2007, Vice President Dick Cheney outed himself in a briefing the White House intended to be anonymous during an overseas trip. “I’ve seen some press reporting says, ‘Cheney went in to beat up on them,’ ” the vice president told reporters, according to the official transcript, adding, “That’s not the way I work.”

Though reporters with him protested, the vice president’s office refused to allow them to identify Mr. Cheney by name — even though it was clear who was speaking.

Under President Obama, the insistence on blanket anonymity has grown to new levels.

The White House’s latest innovation is a variation of the background briefing called the “deep-background briefing,” which it holds for groups of reporters, sometimes several dozen at a time. Reporters may paraphrase what senior administration officials say, but they are forbidden to put anything in quotation marks or identify the speakers.

The White House held such a briefing after the Supreme Court’s health care ruling last month with officials including Mr. Plouffe, Mr. Carney and Dan Pfeiffer, the communications director. But when reporters asked to quote part of the conversation, even anonymously, they were told no. Even the spokesmen were off limits.

