When the President Travels, It’s Cheaper for Reporters to Stay Home

By BRIAN STELTER

WASHINGTON — The news media have found a new area of coverage ripe for cost-cutting: the president of the United States.

For decades it was a given that whenever the president traveled, a charter plane packed with members of the press would travel with him. But the press flights have been sharply curtailed in recent months, a victim of cost-cutting by news organizations that are struggling to stay profitable.

As a result, fewer reporters are tagging along with President Obama and his aides, limiting the number of news sources at a time when Americans are acutely interested in White House policies and personalities.

“The sole reason is money,” said Edwin Chen, the senior White House correspondent for Bloomberg News and the president of the White House Correspondents’ Association, who called the cutbacks alarming.

The budget cutbacks — by news organizations as varied as USA Today and ABC News — are catching up with White House coverage, traditionally job No. 1 of the news bureaus here. It is the latest sign of retrenchment, years after many regional newspapers stopped assigning reporters to the White House. Now even the big networks are feeling strained.

“I’m looking every day at ways we can cut here, cut there,” said Christopher Isham, the Washington bureau chief for CBS News.

When Mr. Obama visits San Francisco on Tuesday and Wednesday, for fund-raisers and a tour of a solar panel company, there will be no charter.

There is growing concern within the press corps that the result of all these cutbacks is less
reporting about the president, coming from fewer and fewer sources. In its place, probably not coincidentally, come more shouting heads, meaning that citizens still hear and see their president constantly — but with fewer facts attached.

“This would have been unthinkable a while ago,” said Frank Sesno, a former White House correspondent and Washington bureau chief for CNN. Mr. Sesno, now the director of the school of media and public affairs at George Washington University, said the cutbacks paralleled “the ebbing of the major networks and newspapers themselves.”

Mr. Isham and other news executives say they remain committed to the White House beat, but they are looking for new and less expensive ways to work. Mark Whitaker, the Washington bureau chief for NBC News, said, “We still cover the president as thoroughly and responsibly as we always have; we just have to look at the best way to do it, both logistically and financially.”

Presidential trips cost the press about $18 million last year, according to the correspondents’ association.

“The prices are exorbitant,” said David Westin, the president of ABC News. Seats on a press charter plane can run $2,000 for a domestic flight and tens of thousands overseas. ABC appears to be watching costs as it reshapes the news div...