

Obama girls fly under the radar but how long will it last?

By Maria Puente, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Could there be two luckier tweens in all of America than Malia and Sasha Obama?

The Jonas Brothers and Beyoncé sing for them. They get to meet the pope, the queen and Harry Potter. They get personal tours of the Eiffel Tower, the Kremlin, the Sistine Chapel, the Tower of London. They go to the best ice-cream parlor in Rome and make their own gelato. They have visited Yellowstone's Old Faithful and the Grand Canyon, gone whitewater rafting and picked peaches in Colorado. This week, they're relaxing at Martha's Vineyard, where the rich and famous and presidential while away their summers.

They've been having a grand time since arriving in the White House, mostly out of the public eye. So far.

President Obama and first lady Michelle Obama are trying to make their daughters' experience in the White House as educational and broadening as possible, taking them along on trips this summer with expressly didactic intentions.

"I want to teach them that Italy isn't just pizza," Michelle remarked in Rome in July during an official visit in which she and the girls toured the Eternal City's ancient sites, such as the Pantheon, the Colosseum and the Vatican's St. Peter's Basilica.

At the same time, the Obamas expect or even demand that the news media spotlight be turned away from the girls skipping alongside them. When the family arrived on Martha's Vineyard on Sunday, the Obamas beseeched the accompanying press corps to stay away from the girls. Given their undeniable appeal and the keen public appetite for news about them, persuading the media to pay little or no attention isn't a slam dunk.

"If the Obamas pull it off, they'll be among the first (of presidential families) to achieve it," says Bonnie Angelo, author of *First Families: The Impact of the White House on Their Lives*.

Big changes since Carter's kids

Indeed, says Anita McBride, who was former first lady Laura Bush's chief of staff, striking the right balance is tricky, for both the first family and the media. There's really no precedent for the Obamas, she says, because the media landscape has so dramatically changed since the last time there were children in the White House, during the Carter administration in the late 1970s and the Kennedy administration in the early 1960s.

By the 1990s, in the age of 24/7 cable news but before the rise of the Internet, the Clintons had become ferociously protective in shielding daughter Chelsea, who was 13 when she entered the White House and soon learned to protect herself with a talk-to-the-hand attitude toward the media that continues to this day.

"There's a great deal of interest in these two beautiful young girls (Malia, 11, and Sasha, 8) and how they spend their time, and the struggle to protect their privacy while giving the public the information they should have is an issue that plagues every first family," McBride says.

So far, the Malia/Sasha news grayout is mostly holding. For example: In June, the girls went to Hogwarts, touring the London set of the final *Harry Potter* movie after being invited by Harry himself, actor Daniel Radcliffe. They even celebrated Sasha's 8th birthday with the cast and crew. It was a highlight of a quick

sightseeing visit to London by Michelle Obama, the girls and their grandmother, Marian Robinson, but there were no photo ops and it wasn't splashed all over front pages or news broadcasts.

Even president talks about them

The White House said nothing about their adventures in London, except that it was a private visit, paid for by the Obamas. Instead, details about what they did and saw — they toured Westminster Abbey and Buckingham Palace, ate a pub lunch, took in *The Lion King*— came from the British media and from the paparazzi.

"We've been very clear that (the Obamas') two girls would have a very private life, and we want to protect that private life and their privacy," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said recently.

In fact, the Obamas, who have said they hesitated about entering the presidential campaign because of the effect on their daughters, let them be interviewed only once — a warm-and-fuzzy family sit-down with *Access Hollywood* that Obama says he immediately regretted.

First lady historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony says there is a tradition dating to President Lincoln that the media not cover the private, uncontroversial activities of presidential children, even if they are part of official visits abroad. "The media understands that this is difficult situation with young children overshadowed by the career choices of their parents," he says.

"The parents are trying to hammer out a balanced situation where they neither exploit nor permit exploitation of their children, but yet want to make trips worthwhile for the kids," he says.

But it's not always clear when the Obama girls and their activities are off limits and when they are not. After all, the president himself brings up the subject of his daughters often. Two days before his inauguration, he published an open letter to them in *Parade* magazine about his hopes for them; in June, he wrote about them again in an essay for *Parade* about what Father's Day means to him. Last week, reporters watched as he treated the girls to ice cream at a Yellowstone general store and talked with them about the geology of the Grand Canyon.

"He wants very much to see and share the outdoors and some of the beautiful places in the country with his daughters," Gibbs explained to reporters on the trip.

When they visited the Kremlin last month, Obama proudly bragged in television interviews about what great travelers the girls are, joked about how Sasha resembled Agent 99 in her trench coat, and talked about what a kick he got from watching the girls "see the world."

When the family toured the old slave port at Cape Coast, Ghana, last month, scenes of the girls exploring the infamous slave castle were covered live back home. The president even mentioned them in his speech there, saying the Africa visit was a teachable moment for the girls.

"I think it was particularly important for Malia and Sasha, who are growing up in such a blessed way, to be reminded that history can take very cruel turns, and hopefully one of the things that was imparted to them during this trip is their sense of obligation to fight oppression and cruelty wherever it appears," he said.

Doug Wead, a historian of presidential families and a former White House assistant to President George H.W. Bush, says he has no doubt Obama took his daughters to Africa because he wanted to be with them, not for public relations purposes.

"But when he does that, he's risking news stories that he doesn't want," Wead says. "He's tempting the media because he's hauling the kids around and putting them in positions where legitimate news stories can be filed."

Advice from the Clintons

Presidents' children can become news if presidents make them so, Wead says. President Carter's daughter, Amy, who was 9 when her father entered the White House, went on presidential trips and even to a state dinner (where she was spotted reading a book). Then, during a 1980 presidential debate with his opponent, Ronald Reagan, Carter mentioned that he discussed nuclear weapons with Amy, then 13. "That's when the gloves came off" the media and Carter's political opponents felt free to criticize him for consulting his daughter on such an important issue, Wead says.

The Obamas consulted the Clintons (who in their time consulted Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis) about how to protect and raise well-adjusted children in the White House. Wead says the Clintons didn't hesitate to pressure media executives to keep Chelsea off limits.

"The Obamas know this, so they are emboldened to shove back a little bit (against anything they view as a threat to the girls) because it worked for the Clintons," says Wead. But even the Clintons were unable to stop *Saturday Night Live* from making fun of Chelsea, which Wead says was "as mean and as harmful as anything an adolescent child has ever experienced."

In Maryland this month, outside another angry town hall meeting on health-insurance reform, a man held up a sign calling for "Death to Obama, Michelle and 2 Stupid Kids." The man was detained for questioning by the Secret Service but was released without being arrested.

But when a nutrition-policy group put up a poster in Washington's Union Station calling for healthy school lunches and mentioning "President Obama's daughters" (but not their names or their pictures), the White House counsel's office leapt into action, demanding it be taken down and threatening a lawsuit, says Neal Barnard, president of Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, which lobbies Congress on nutrition issues.

Earlier this year, when the company that makes Beanie Babies tried to sell dolls that looked like Malia and Sasha and had similar names, Michelle Obama called it "inappropriate" and the company dropped its plans. But Barnard says he's not intimidated; he declined to take down the poster, citing the First Amendment. However, he doesn't blame the Obamas.

"It's not an invasion of privacy. We didn't use (the girls') names or pictures," he says. "Did the White House cross the line? Yes. But this all came from the people who work for (the Obamas) — it wasn't the president." The president's and first lady's spokespeople refuse to discuss the matter as it involves the girls.

The Obamas are learning that one uncontroversial way to protect the girls' privacy is to spend time at Camp David in western Maryland, where they can relax away from prying eyes and in a beautiful setting. In July, Malia celebrated her 11th birthday there with 20 chums. "Every first family enjoys that refuge," McBride says.

Contributing: The Associated Press