

A careful non-answer is not a *denial*

One mechanism of institutional communication — how to read 'declined to comment,' non-denial denials, and statements engineered to confirm nothing.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

How This Guide Works

This is part of **Incognati Civics**, applying the field-guide format to the way institutions communicate — press releases, official statements, guidance documents, corrections, embargoes — the packaging between a record and the public, examined the same way regardless of which institution or which side it favors. Each specimen goes deep on one mechanism, with primary documents, regulations, and nonpartisan scholarship listed in full on the references page.

INCOGNATI CIVICS — INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

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'Declined to Comment' & the Non-Denial

Nec Negat Nec Fatetur

Governing precedent / case Non-denial statements Status Recurring in official responses

OBSERVED SPECIMEN

PRESS RESPONSES AND OFFICIAL STATEMENTS

*Asked a direct question, an institution can answer without answering: “We do not comment on ongoing matters,” “We take these concerns seriously,” “The report contains numerous inaccuracies” — without saying which, or denying the central claim. A **non-denial** disputes tone or process while leaving the specific allegation untouched; “declined to comment” is neither a confirmation nor a denial. Each reads, to a hurried audience, as though the matter were addressed, when the precise question was never actually answered.*

THE HOOK

A fluent, confident statement feels like a response, so the unanswered question fades from view.

THE MECHANISM

The statement engages the framing, the tone, or the process while never affirming or denying the specific factual claim — leaving it, precisely, unanswered.

Field mark: when an institution ‘responds,’ check whether it actually confirmed or denied the specific claim — ‘declined to comment’ and a non-denial leave the factual question open, not closed.

See the full references page for complete citations.

References

every source checkable at the link provided; DOIs given where the source has one

REFERENCE

Nonpartisan journalism guides on parsing non-denial denials and ‘no comment.’

<https://www.poynter.org/>

Guidance on distinguishing a substantive denial from a statement that addresses only tone or process.

REFERENCE · SPJ

Society of Professional Journalists, Code of Ethics — seeking and characterizing responses accurately.

<https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

Standard for accurately representing whether a subject responded to the specific allegation.

Reading an Official Response: A Gut Check

four questions before ‘the agency responded’ means the question was answered

1 Restate the question

What specific claim was actually put to them?

2 Check for a denial

Did they deny that claim, or only object to tone or process?

3 Decode ‘no comment’

It is neither confirmation nor denial — treat it as neither.

4 Watch vague disputes

‘Numerous inaccuracies’ without specifics denies nothing concrete.

INCOGNATI CIVICS

The Series Continues

This is Specimen No. 12 of the Institutional Communications section within Incognati Civics. The full queue of twelve specimens is listed on the cover. This section joins Elections, Federal Laws, and Official Data Reporting within Civics, with local government planned beyond it. The Incognati Atlas catalogs the underlying patterns across all of it.