

A characterization is not the *document*

One mechanism of institutional communication — why an official's summary of a report can diverge from the report itself, and why the document is the record.

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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Spokesperson's Statement vs. the Report

Verba Non Tabulae

Governing precedent / case Statement vs. underlying record **Status** Recurring around any official report

OBSERVED SPECIMEN

PRESS CONFERENCES AND OFFICIAL STATEMENTS

*When a report drops, the institution often speaks first through a spokesperson, and that characterization — “the review found no wrongdoing,” “the data show the program is working” — travels faster than the document it describes. But a report can contain findings, caveats, dissents, and scope limits that a one-line statement flattens. The spokesperson's job is to frame; the report's job is to record. When the two differ, the **primary document** governs, and a statement that omits a report's central caveat is not the same as the report.*

THE HOOK

The statement arrives first and is quotable, so it stands in for a report most people never open.

THE MECHANISM

A spokesperson selects and frames; the underlying report is the authoritative record. Divergence appears in what the statement omits or recharacterizes.

Field mark: when an official ‘summarizes’ a report, get the report — a statement is a chosen framing, and the document's findings, caveats, and dissents are the record it must answer to.

See the full references page for complete citations.

References

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

REFERENCE · SPJ

Society of Professional Journalists, Code of Ethics — verify claims against primary documents.

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

Professional standard for checking official characterizations against the underlying record.

PRIMARY-SOURCE PRACTICE

GovInfo / agency report repositories (e.g., Inspectors General reports).

<https://www.oversight.gov/reports>

Where the underlying reports behind official statements can be read in full.

Reading an Official Statement: A Gut Check

four questions before a spokesperson's line becomes what the report said

1 Get the document

The report, not the statement about it, is the record.

2 List the omissions

Ask what caveats or dissents the statement left out.

3 Match the words

Compare the statement's verbs to the report's actual findings.

4 Note who is speaking

A framing has an author and an interest; the document does not.

INCOGNATI CIVICS

The Series Continues

This is Specimen No. 2 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.