

# New Research Highlights How Disabling Facebook Comments May Reduce Reach of Government Communications

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Government agencies that disable comments on their Facebook pages may be unintentionally limiting how many people see their posts. New research from the Accountability Project Institute highlights a growing tension between complying with First Amendment requirements and maintaining the reach of official communications online. As some agencies turn off comments to avoid creating a public forum or to reduce objectionable content, they may also be weakening the very engagement signals that help their messages reach the public.

To determine the downstream effect of disabling comments, the research by the Accountability Project Institute examined how Facebook's ranking system prioritizes content and identifies comment activity as a key signal in determining how widely posts are distributed. The project determined that Facebook evaluates pages based on how visitors to that page engage with the content they find there. These lower engagement rankings can result in fewer people seeing the original Facebook posts.

"Through our research, we found that Facebook's previous algorithms prioritized certain engagement signals -- especially likes -- in determining which posts should be distributed more widely on the platform. Facebook then shifted its ranking system to emphasize meaningful social interactions, placing greater weight on signals such as comments, replies to comments, and back-and-forth discussion between users," Research Director Daniel McKenzie said. "Under this approach, posts that generate active comment threads are more likely to place higher in the feeds and will be pushed out to be viewed by many more users."

The findings have important implications for government organizations and public officials, who increasingly rely on social media to communicate with residents but must also navigate constitutional limits on how they manage public discussion online. This research suggests that the government organizations that disable comments entirely on their pages may face significant unintended consequences.

"When an agency turns off comments on its Facebook page, posts lose one of the core engagement signals the algorithm relies on, and this reduces the likelihood that these government posts will be distributed widely by the platform," McKenzie noted. "For public agencies that rely on Facebook to share safety alerts, meeting notices, and other crucial official information, this means fewer constituents will see the material."

McKenzie pointed to an example of a police department posting security camera footage of a wanted criminal. "If the agency has comments turned off, far fewer people will see that video, which could reduce the chance of the suspect being quickly identified or apprehended," he said. "That could have a worrisome real-world effect."

The Accountability Project Institute plans to continue examining how algorithmic ranking systems influence the accessibility of government information online and how public institutions can communicate effectively while respecting constitutional protections.

For more information about the Institute and its research work, go to [AccountabilityProjectInstitute.com](https://AccountabilityProjectInstitute.com).

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