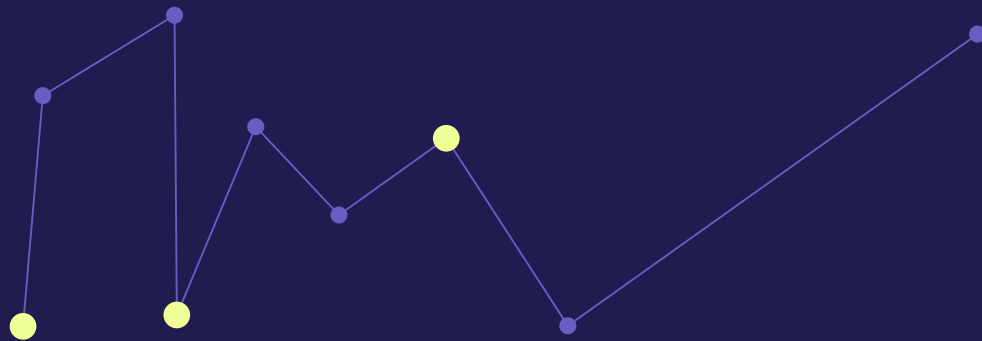


# Manufactured Stakeholder Voice

When apparent consensus is engineered, engagement becomes an intelligence problem



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**ARTEFACT91**

Campaign Intelligence + Strategic Communications

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When apparent consensus is engineered, engagement becomes an intelligence problem

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## HOW TO READ IT

A briefing, not a report: the executive brief carries the argument, the numbered sections carry the evidence and the method, and every external figure is attributed to its source.

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## Executive Brief

Stakeholder engagement rests on a basic assumption: the voices entering the process are what they appear to be. New research shows why institutions can no longer take that assumption for granted.

A 22 September 2026 paper in the *Journal of Management and Governance* develops a conceptual model of astroturfing in sustainability governance: apparently independent stakeholder voice can be manufactured to shape which issues are treated as material, legitimate or urgent. Separately, September research from the Citizen Lab documents the continuing professionalization of deceptive influence-for-hire activity.

This does not mean every burst of criticism, advocacy or public participation is manipulated. Treating legitimate dissent as inauthentic is itself a serious trust failure. The challenge is to build verification into stakeholder intelligence without turning verification into a pretext for dismissing inconvenient voices.

### The proposition

Stakeholder legitimacy should be assessed through evidence of provenance, independence, behaviour and consequence—not volume alone.

## SECTION 01

## From Stakeholder Mapping to Stakeholder Authentication

Traditional stakeholder maps ask who has interest and influence. That is no longer enough.

Institutions should also ask:

**PROVENANCE** — Can we identify where the claim, campaign or coalition originated?

**INDEPENDENCE** — Are apparently separate voices meaningfully independent?

**TRANSPARENCY** — Are sponsorship, representation and material interests disclosed?

**AUTHORITY** — Why should this actor's evidence or position carry weight?

**CONSEQUENCE** — What decision could this activity influence?

Authentication is not a binary real-or-fake test. A stakeholder may be authentic while participating in a coordinated campaign. A coalition may be organized and still represent legitimate interests. Paid advocacy can be transparent and lawful. The concern is concealed coordination that creates a misleading appearance of independent support, opposition or consensus.

## SECTION 02

## The Artefact91 Stakeholder Authenticity Lens

Artefact91 recommends assessing five layers before high-consequence decisions rely on apparent stakeholder voice.

**IDENTITY** — Who is speaking, and is the actor identifiable?

**INTEREST** — What relationship does the actor have to the issue?

**INDEPENDENCE** — Are multiple voices meaningfully independent?

**EVIDENCE** — What claims are being made, and what supports them?

**CONSEQUENCE** — Would the apparent scale or diversity of participation materially change a decision?

The higher the consequence, the stronger the verification standard should be.

## SECTION 03

## Why This Matters for Public Affairs

Public affairs teams routinely interpret stakeholder signals: submissions, consultations, petitions, coalitions, media coverage, social activity, letters, community meetings and advocacy campaigns.

Manufactured participation can distort three judgments.

**MATERIALITY** — An issue can appear more widespread or urgent than the evidence supports.

**REPRESENTATION** — A coordinated cluster can appear to represent multiple independent constituencies.

**MOMENTUM** — Artificial amplification can create the impression that opinion is moving rapidly.

The response is not to discount digital participation. It is to stop treating raw activity as a proxy for constituency size, independence or decision relevance.

## SECTION 04

## The Manufactured-Consensus Risk Model

Assess risk across two dimensions: authenticity uncertainty and decision consequence.

| POSITION                            | READING                     | RESPONSE                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Low uncertainty / low consequence   | Ordinary participation      | Monitor normally                                                                               |
| High uncertainty / low consequence  | Noisy but not decisive      | Preserve evidence and avoid overreacting to volume                                             |
| Low uncertainty / high consequence  | Real voices, real stakes    | Engage directly and document how their evidence informs the decision                           |
| High uncertainty / high consequence | Consensus may be engineered | Activate cross-functional verification before treating apparent consensus as decision evidence |

The purpose is not to delay decisions indefinitely. It is to prevent uncertain participation signals from acquiring more authority than the evidence warrants.

#### SECTION 05

## Protect Legitimate Participation

Verification systems can cause harm if institutions use them to delegitimize criticism.

First, verify claims and actors separately. A claim can be accurate even when its amplifier is questionable.

Second, do not equate coordination with deception. Advocacy organizations coordinate by design. Coalitions share messages. Employees organize. Communities mobilize.

Third, apply the same standard to support and opposition. Institutions should not scrutinize critics aggressively while accepting supportive stakeholder activity at face value.

#### SECTION 06

## Design Consultations for Evidentiary Integrity

Public consultations and stakeholder processes should make the basis of participation legible.

Consider:

- disclosure of organizational affiliation where appropriate;
- clear rules for representing a constituency;
- separation of duplicate submissions from distinct substantive arguments;
- publication of methodology for counting and weighting input;
- qualitative analysis alongside raw submission counts;
- verification for high-consequence representative claims;
- documentation of how evidence affected the final decision;
- privacy protections proportionate to the context.

The objective is not to create barriers to participation. It is to prevent volume from masquerading as representativeness.

## SECTION 07

# Measurement: Count Less, Interpret More

A stakeholder dashboard should not stop at mentions, submissions or engagement.

Add:

**INDEPENDENCE** — How many distinct constituencies or networks are visible?

**AUTHORITY** — Which actors have recognized standing or credible evidence?

**EVIDENCE QUALITY** — Are claims supported by verifiable information?

**CONSEQUENCE** — What institutional behaviour is changing?

**UNCERTAINTY** — What remains unverified?

## The shift

From “How loud is this?” to “What does this activity reliably tell us?”

## SECTION 08

# The Stakeholder Authentication Protocol

### ARTEFACT91 STAKEHOLDER AUTHENTICATION PROTOCOL

OBSERVE → VERIFY → MAP → TEST INDEPENDENCE → ASSESS CONSEQUENCE → ENGAGE  
→ DOCUMENT → ADAPT

**OBSERVE** — Capture the signal without prematurely interpreting it.

**VERIFY** — Establish identity, provenance and evidence where proportionate.

**MAP** — Understand relationships and constituencies.

**TEST INDEPENDENCE** — Distinguish separate voices from coordinated activity.

**ASSESS CONSEQUENCE** — Determine what decision or behaviour the activity could affect.

**ENGAGE** — Engage legitimate stakeholders directly.

**DOCUMENT** — Record the evidentiary basis for institutional decisions.

**ADAPT** — Update the stakeholder model as new evidence emerges.

SECTION 09

## What Leaders Should Ask

Are we treating volume as representativeness?

Which stakeholder claims would materially change this decision?

How do we know apparently independent voices are independent?

Could our consultation methodology be gamed?

Are we applying the same verification standard to supporters and critics?

Can we explain how stakeholder input changed the decision?

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## Artefact91 Point of View

Stakeholder engagement is not becoming less important. It is becoming more demanding.

Institutions need to hear dissent, understand coalitions and respond to real changes in public expectations. A fragmented information environment also makes it easier to manufacture the appearance of constituency, momentum and consensus.

The answer is not suspicion by default. It is evidentiary discipline.

The strongest stakeholder strategy combines openness to participation with a clear understanding of who is speaking, what they represent, what evidence they bring, how independent the signals are and what consequence they should have for the decision.

## Sources & Research Base

Fayezi, S. (2026). "Manufactured stakeholder voice in global value chain sustainability governance: Toward a conceptual model of astroturfing." *Journal of Management and Governance*. Published 22 September 2026.

Fittarelli, A., Scott-Railton, J., & Scott, M. (2026). "BlackCore's Influence Operations for Hire." Citizen Lab, University of Toronto. Published 17 September 2026.

USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations (2026). "A Quiet Shift: 2026 Global Communication Report." Context on polarization and the increasingly selective role of institutional communications.

### Methodology Note

This briefing synthesizes current public research and Artefact91 analysis. External findings are attributed to their sources. The Stakeholder Authenticity Lens, Manufactured-Consensus Risk Model and Stakeholder Authentication Protocol are Artefact91 analytical frameworks. Indicators of coordination are not proof of deception, and institutions should avoid characterizing legitimate advocacy or organized participation as inauthentic without evidence.