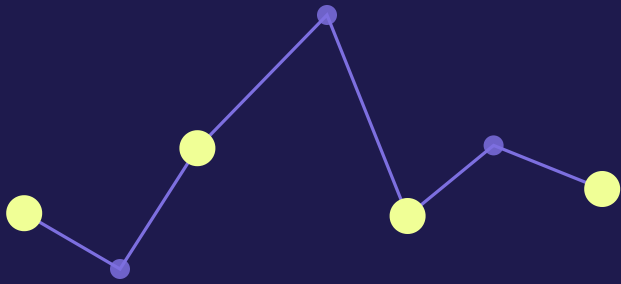


The Public Information Boundary

Why institutional communications needs a governance layer between public information and political persuasion



In this briefing

Why institutional communications needs a governance layer between public information and political persuasion

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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.

ARTEFACT91 BRIEFING

Executive Brief

A live U.S. dispute over taxpayer-funded advertising has exposed a communications problem that is broader than the legal question at the centre of the controversy: when does public information begin to look like political persuasion?

On 30 September 2026, Reuters reported that U.S. Federal Communications Commission Chair Brendan Carr said government advertisements featuring President Donald Trump did not, in his view, raise issues warranting FCC review. Democratic lawmakers, ethics experts and advocacy groups have challenged the advertisements, including their use of public funds and their proximity to the U.S. midterm elections. President Trump has defended the spots as advertisements for the country. The dispute remains contested; this briefing does not treat the complaints as a finding of illegality. [1]

The strategic issue is different. Institutions can comply with a rule and still create a legitimacy problem if audiences cannot distinguish public-purpose communication from party, electoral or personal political promotion.

ARTEFACT91 POSITION

PUBLIC-SECTOR COMMUNICATIONS NEEDS A CONTROL LAYER THAT TESTS PUBLIC PURPOSE BEFORE CREATIVE EXECUTION IS APPROVED.

That layer tests public purpose, political signals, messenger choice, targeting, timing and evidentiary support. The question is not simply, “Can we run this?” It is, “Could a reasonable member of the public understand why this communication exists as a public service rather than as political promotion?”

SECTION 01

What Changed

The current U.S. controversy matters because it brings several longstanding questions together in one visible case: taxpayer funding, a sitting political leader as the central creative asset, campaign-like aesthetics and language, timing close to an election, and disagreement over which oversight body—if any—should intervene. [1][9]

The legal boundary in the United States is contextual. U.S. Government Accountability Office decisions distinguish prohibited covert propaganda, self-aggrandizement and purely partisan activity from legitimate agency communications that explain policies, programs or official business. GAO has also found that political content alone does not automatically make a government communication unlawful. [2][3]

For communications leaders, that means a message may sit inside formal authority while still creating a public perception that institutional resources are serving a partisan or personal political objective. The audience must be able to distinguish the institution speaking in the public interest from political actors speaking in pursuit of political advantage.

SECTION 02

Legal Compliance Is Necessary. It Is Not the Whole Trust Test

Public institutions operate under law, policy, procurement rules and administrative controls. Those controls are essential. But reputation risk can emerge before a formal violation is established.

LEGALITY — Is the communication permitted under the applicable law, appropriations rules, election law, ethics rules and administrative policy?

PROPRIETY — Is the use of public resources consistent with the institution’s mandate, neutrality obligations, public-service standards and documented approval processes?

LEGITIMACY — Would a reasonable audience see the communication as serving a defensible public purpose rather than a party, campaign or personal political interest?

A strong review process tests all three. Communications teams create avoidable risk when they collapse them into one question and assume that “legal” automatically means “trusted.”

SECTION 03

The Public Purpose × Partisan Signal Matrix

The fastest way to diagnose the boundary is to assess two dimensions: public purpose and partisan signals.

INFORM — High public purpose, low partisan signals. The communication has a clear service, safety, policy, participation or accountability purpose and uses institutionally neutral creative. Proceed with normal substantiation, accessibility and approval controls.

DEPOLITICISE — High public purpose, high partisan signals. The public need may be legitimate, but the messenger, slogans, colours, footage, attack language, targeting or timing create avoidable political cues. Preserve the public information objective and redesign the execution.

REASSESS — Low public purpose, low partisan signals. The creative may look neutral, but the reason for spending public resources is weak or poorly documented. Return to mandate, audience need and measurable public value before proceeding.

STOP + ESCALATE — Low public purpose, high partisan signals. This is the highest-risk quadrant. Pause publication and require senior communications, legal, ethics/propriety and accountable executive review.

The framework deliberately separates content appearance from public purpose. A neutral-looking advertisement can still be an unjustified use of public money; a communication about a politically salient policy can still be legitimate public information when its purpose and execution are properly governed.

SECTION 04

The Artefact91 Public Information Integrity Test

Before approving a high-consequence institutional campaign, test nine factors.

MANDATE — What statutory, policy, program, service, safety or accountability responsibility authorises the communication? Could the institution explain that purpose in one sentence without referring to political advantage?

PUBLIC UTILITY — What does the audience need to know, understand, access, avoid or do? A public message should solve an identifiable information or participation problem.

MESSENGER — Why is this person or office the right messenger? Would institutional authority be clearer if the message came from the department, agency, service lead or technical official rather than a political office-holder?

CLAIM — Are the claims objective, factual, explanatory and supportable? Separate evidence about program performance from political interpretation, aspiration or self-congratulation.

TIMING — Would the communication be necessary in substantially the same form outside an election, leadership contest, legislative confrontation or other politically sensitive window? If timing changes the answer, document why.

CREATIVE CODES — Does the execution borrow party slogans, campaign footage, dominant party-associated colours, attack framing, applause lines, rally imagery or other cues that make institutional communication resemble election material?

AUDIENCE + TARGETING — Is targeting based on a legitimate public-information need, service eligibility, geography, safety exposure or program relevance—or does it disproportionately resemble electoral segmentation without a defensible service rationale?

SPEND — Is the level of public expenditure proportionate to the public need? Can the institution document the media rationale, procurement route, value-for-money logic and decision owner?

REVIEW — What independent, cross-functional or documented review occurred before release? The higher the political salience, spend or proximity to an election, the stronger the review record should be.

A campaign that fails one factor is not automatically improper. The test is a risk-screening and decision tool. Its purpose is to make assumptions visible before publication rather than defend them after controversy begins.

SECTION 05

Canada: Building Non-Partisanship into the Control System

Canada's federal model is useful because it converts non-partisanship from an aspiration into explicit creative and process criteria. Treasury Board guidance states that government advertising must be objective, factual and explanatory; free from party names, logos, slogans and identifiers; not use the governing party's primary colour as a dominant colour; and be devoid of the name, voice or image of a current prime minister, minister, member of Parliament or senator. [4]

For campaigns above \$250,000, external third-party review is mandatory under the federal oversight mechanism. Treasury Board told Parliament in 2026 that the external review system has operated since 2016 and that updated criteria were introduced in October 2025. [5]

In the first quarter of 2026–27, Ad Standards reviewed 1,137 advertising creatives across 15 campaigns and made 12 recommendations under the first non-partisanship criterion. The results are published quarterly. [6]

The lesson is not that one national model can simply be copied elsewhere. It is that political neutrality becomes easier to defend when it is designed into the workflow before the creative reaches the public.

SECTION 06

United Kingdom: Propriety as Communications Practice

The United Kingdom's Government Communication Service frames propriety as an operating discipline. Its guidance says government communications should be relevant to government responsibilities, objective and explanatory, not liable to be construed as party political, and proportionate in their use of public funds. It also warns against personal image-making. [7]

The Government Communication Service's 2026 standards further position objectivity, impartiality and propriety as professional expectations for civil-service communicators. [8]

This matters because the communications team is not simply executing a ministerial preference. It has a professional responsibility to maintain the institutional boundary that allows public information to retain credibility across changes of government.

SECTION 07

United States: A Contextual Line, Not a Simple Visual Rule

U.S. appropriations decisions illustrate why these cases require judgment. GAO has described the publicity-or-propaganda restriction as covering covert propaganda, self-aggrandizement and purely partisan communications, while recognizing agencies' legitimate authority to explain programs and policies. [2][3]

That context is why the current dispute cannot responsibly be reduced to a single claim such as "a politician appeared in an ad, therefore the ad is illegal." The current complaint is just that—a complaint—and the FCC chair has publicly said he does not see a basis for FCC review. [1][9]

For strategic communicators, however, the unresolved legal debate reinforces the need for a separate reputation and legitimacy test. The institution should be able to show its public-purpose reasoning even when regulators disagree or no regulator ultimately intervenes.

SECTION 08

Agencies and Vendors Are Part of the Control Environment

External agencies can become the final execution point for a blurred mandate. That makes agency governance part of institutional risk management. Briefs for publicly funded work should record:

- public mandate and intended public benefit
- accountable client decision-maker
- factual substantiation for material claims
- reason for using a political office-holder as messenger, if applicable
- targeting logic and excluded audiences
- campaign timing and election-period sensitivities
- creative separation from party assets and slogans
- approval, legal, ethics and propriety reviews; and
- version history and final sign-off.

This is not an agency substituting itself for counsel or the client's statutory authority. It is an agency refusing to treat governance ambiguity as a creative brief.

SECTION 09

The Public-Purpose Dossier

For high-salience government or publicly funded campaigns, Artefact91 recommends creating a short evidence file before launch. If the communication is later challenged, the institution should not have to reconstruct its reasoning under pressure.

The dossier should contain: mandate; objective; audience need; key facts and sources; messenger rationale; creative rationale; targeting criteria; media plan; public expenditure; approval path; legal/propriety review; accessibility review; anticipated criticism; and the trigger conditions for pausing or modifying the campaign.

The strongest defence is not “we meant well.” It is a contemporaneous record showing why public resources were used, which safeguards were applied and what public benefit the institution intended to produce.

SECTION 10

When the Boundary Is Challenged

When journalists, legislators, watchdogs, staff or the public challenge a government communication as partisan, the first response should not be a debate about motive.

ARTEFACT91 FRAMEWORK

FACTS → PURPOSE → AUTHORITY → REVIEW → SPEND → SEPARATION → REMEDY

FACTS — Confirm exactly what ran, where, when, in which versions and to which audiences.

PURPOSE — State the public-information objective and the audience need it was intended to address.

AUTHORITY — Identify the mandate and accountable decision-maker.

REVIEW — Explain which legal, policy, ethics, non-partisanship or procurement reviews were completed.

SPEND — Publish or be prepared to disclose the cost and media rationale where appropriate.

SEPARATION — Describe controls that separated institutional resources from party, campaign or personal political operations.

REMEDY — If a weakness is identified, pause, redesign, correct, withdraw or strengthen the control rather than defending an avoidable error.

This approach keeps the institution focused on verifiable governance rather than subjective claims about political intent.

SECTION 11

The Reasonable-Audience Test

A useful final challenge before publication is simple:

ARTEFACT91 POSITION

IF THE “PAID FOR BY” LINE DISAPPEARED, COULD A REASONABLE MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC STILL TELL THIS APART FROM CAMPAIGN MATERIAL?

Judge it on purpose, tone, messenger, claims and creative treatment. If the answer is no, the institution should understand why before it proceeds. A second question is equally important:

Would we be comfortable using substantially the same communication if a different political party controlled the institution tomorrow?

Public information should be able to survive political turnover. That is one of the strongest practical tests of institutional rather than partisan design.

SECTION 12

The Artefact91 Operating Sequence

ARTEFACT91 FRAMEWORK

MANDATE → EVIDENCE → MESSENGER → CREATIVE → TARGETING → REVIEW → PUBLISH → AUDIT

MANDATE — Establish the public responsibility.

EVIDENCE — Define the public need and substantiate claims.

MESSENGER — Select authority based on function, not visibility alone.

CREATIVE — Remove avoidable campaign and partisan codes.

TARGETING — Tie segmentation to public purpose.

REVIEW — Apply legal, policy, propriety and reputational checks.

PUBLISH — Release with clear sponsorship and accessible information.

AUDIT — Preserve versions, approvals, spend and post-publication evidence.

SECTION 13

A 30-Day Readiness Sprint

DAYS 1–7 — MAP: Inventory active and planned publicly funded campaigns. Identify high-spend, high-salience, election-adjacent and leader-led communications. Map applicable legal, policy, ethics and advertising rules.

DAYS 8–14 — TEST: Run priority campaigns through the nine-part Public Information Integrity Test. Record where the public-purpose case is weak, political signals are high or review responsibilities are unclear.

DAYS 15–21 — SEPARATE: Strengthen operational separation between institutional and party/political communications: asset libraries, approvals, staff roles, data access, targeting, slogans, brand elements, spokesperson protocols and procurement instructions.

DAYS 22–30 — PROVE: Create public-purpose dossiers for the highest-risk campaigns. Run a challenge exercise in which a journalist, auditor, opposition legislator or watchdog asks why the campaign exists, who approved it, who paid for it and what public benefit it produces.

ARTEFACT91 BRIEFING

Artefact91 Point of View

Institutional communications earns authority by being recognisably institutional.

Public information does not have to be sterile, apolitical in subject matter or stripped of persuasive technique. Governments legitimately need people to vaccinate, evacuate, file taxes, apply for benefits, comply with rules, understand policies, participate in consultations and change behaviour in the public interest.

The line is crossed strategically when the public-purpose rationale becomes weaker while partisan, electoral or personal political signals become stronger—and the institution has no defensible control system for explaining why.

Artefact91's standard is therefore not “avoid politics.” It is: protect the institutional purpose of public communication, make the governance visible and ensure the message can withstand political turnover, hostile scrutiny and a public-record request.

ARTEFACT91 POSITION

THE STRONGEST PUBLIC COMMUNICATION SHOULD STILL MAKE SENSE WHEN THE PERSON, PARTY AND NEWS CYCLE CHANGE.

ARTEFACT91 BRIEFING

Sources & Research Base

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Research Note

This briefing distinguishes verified institutional rules and published oversight guidance from allegations in an active political controversy. The U.S. advertising dispute is presented as a current case study in boundary risk, not as a legal conclusion. Artefact91's frameworks are analytical tools for communications governance and should be adapted to the relevant jurisdiction, mandate, counsel and facts.