

Preface: Necessary Disclosures

On certain days, I take a back route to the Rutgers University campus where I work. Part of that journey takes me past a business park that I never used to notice, but which one day began to strike me as a bit odd. The lot houses two somewhat similar multistory office buildings with dark windows but no identifying information on the structures at all. In fact, the only real signage to be found is along the road where two address markers read 45 Knightsbridge Road and 53 Knightsbridge Road. The occasional appearance of a delivery truck and the rare sighting of people entering/leaving suggest to me that the complex is not abandoned. The presence of a few dozen cars in the back of the buildings, several with state government tags, seems to confirm the existence of one or more organizations. An online search of the addresses reveals at least a management company and a law office in one building; moreover, the other seems to include a state youth and family services office, a church, a children's learning and skills development center, a business intelligence software company, an IT company, a religious foundation, and the office of a registered nurse—though few of these have their own websites (and most of those that do seem to downplay the location). As a result, this place and the organizations inside are essentially invisible. Most people would never drive by these addresses, and even if you did there are few clues as to what organizations may reside there.

For me, this obscure office park began to symbolize an entire range of organizations that are hidden by their own design and circumstances—tucked

away in unmarked buildings, well off less-traveled roads, and with minimal online presence. We often hear that we live in an age of transparency and we are regularly bombarded by various corporate branding efforts; but amid all that exists an alternate reality that the hype about openness and image management may, in fact, mask. Organizations like those in my emblematic office park represent only the tip of the iceberg as we start to consider the many hidden collectives in our society. This book is about these hidden, anonymous, backstreet, and/or covert organizations and how we should think about them relative to the more familiar and visible collectives on which we often set our sights.

My basic argument in this book is reasonably straightforward. Many organizations and their members devote extensive resources to promoting themselves and being known to others—and as a result it is easy to simply assume that all organizations wish to be highly visible and easily identified. But that assumption is fundamentally flawed because not all organizations want or need their identity to be recognized and not all organizational members want to have their membership or affiliation known by at least certain others. When we inadvertently privilege organizations that wish to be seen, we are taking an overly narrow view of the collectives in society. As we proceed to consider secret societies, anonymous support programs, hate groups, terrorist cells, covert military units, organized crime, gangs, parts of the underground economy, front organizations, stigmatized businesses, and even those hidden enterprises tucked away in quiet office parks, we have to question what we think we know about the identity goals of organizations and their members. The concealing and revealing of identity by these organizations and their members to relevant audiences can vary substantially—demanding that our thinking and theorizing about organizations expand to encompass these anonymous, hidden organizations.

This book is not intended as an exposé or investigative reporting, even though much of the material may be unfamiliar and even provocative to many readers; instead, its primary goal is to offer a framework for thinking about how a wide range of organizations and their members communicate their identity to relevant audiences. Considering the degree to which organizations strategically make themselves visible, the extent to which members express their identification with the organization, and whether the relevant audience is more mass/public or local, we can describe various “regions” in which these collectives reside—ranging from transparent and only somewhat

shaded to more shadowed and dark. Importantly, organizations operating in these spaces differ in how they and their members communicate identity to others. So much of our current thinking and research has been around relatively transparent organizations and those operating only somewhat in the shadows, but the perspective offered here helps draw attention to more shadowed and dark collectives as important organizations that must also manage identity communication issues (sometimes with very different goals). The framework developed here is not meant to replace other typologies, models, and categorization systems for classifying organizations—but it can help us fundamentally rethink the contemporary landscape by focusing on the communication of identity along a much broader spectrum.

This particular reframing is timely. We find ourselves in an era in which the desire for organizational disclosure looms large around the globe. The work of collectives like WikiLeaks and the impact of the Occupy movement suggest deep concerns about overly secretive institutions. At the same time, we have seen an increase in the use of hidden political donors, a rise in the prevalence of anonymous organizational sources, and growing terrorist and underground movements in many parts of the world. These forces and the efforts to counteract them seem to regularly involve clandestine actions and at least partially hidden organizations. Add to this the rapid development of communication and information technologies that may on the one hand help organizations and their members to hide their existence while on the other hand provide traces that identify them to relevant audiences.

All this matters because there are real consequences associated with the successful and unsuccessful efforts of these organizations and their members to conceal and reveal their identity to key audiences. Organizations and/or members who remain hidden may continue to commit terrorist and criminal acts without punishment. Yet, anonymous support groups and stigmatized businesses protect their legitimacy and their members' safety by remaining hidden. Substantial embarrassment and even casualties can occur when covert intelligence operations are revealed; but people may be spared substantial harm and misinformation when the operations of front organizations are exposed. Beyond that, the financial and mental resources required to conceal or reveal identity can be enormous for certain organizations and their members. For these reasons and more, we as citizens/consumers, policy-makers, and scholars need models and frameworks that can provide us with ways to better understand hidden organizations relative to those about which

we know more. The goal here is not only to shed some light on these consequential collectives but also to better understand and appreciate the various degrees of darkness in which they may operate.

Although the need for this framework may be current, my own interest in these issues began years ago. My love of James Bond was partly due to a fascination with MI6 and covert British intelligence operations—as well as the secret organization (SPECTRE) that he sometimes battled. One of the many lures of the television show *Charlie's Angels* was the mostly unidentified Charlie, who owned the Townsend Detective Agency but never appeared to the detectives or the viewing audience. The secretive organizations on *Star Trek* (e.g., Obsidian Order, Section 31) and *The X-Files* (the Syndicate) were, for me, some of the most fascinating aspects of those cult classics' mythologies. In another sense, I was playing with issues of anonymity and identity even before online tools made it relatively easy to do so. For example, I published a column in our college newspaper under the pseudonym "Papa C," and my secret camp counselor identity at Camp Cahito in San Diego was "Bronco."

As formative as some of those early experiences were, they are not what best position me to talk about anonymous organizations. Admittedly, this book is not an ethnographic account, drawn from my own vast experiences spent underground or in various clandestine operations. In fact, my direct experience as a member of a hidden organization is limited. I am not a former street gang member, have never worked for military intelligence, and went to a small college without secret societies—at least to my knowledge. However, I have firsthand experience with different aspects of the informal economy, have worked part-time for what I would describe as essentially a front organization, and have belonged to a couple of organizations that I would probably never admit to others. I have also encountered several companies that I describe in the book as mildly or moderately shaded organizations, and I worked behind the scenes for a public relations firm that was regularly hidden from at least certain others as we worked to promote the image of our client organizations. While you may also consider yourself to be someone who is generally open with few secret affiliations, I am willing to bet that most readers can claim at least one comparable experience—along with a similar fascination about those organizations operating in at least some degree of darkness.

More notably, as part of my intellectual interest in organizations and communication, I have been examining anonymity and related topics in that

context for over twenty years. In that time, I have published dozens of theoretical and empirical articles and book chapters about organizational identification, anonymity, and organizational communication generally. This book has afforded me a unique opportunity to pull together those scholarly strands. As an added bonus, this project has also provided a wonderful excuse for me to make repeated trips to places like the International Spy Museum, to visit some of these hidden organizations in person, and to rewatch all my favorite Bond classics.

With those admissions on the table, it is time to more formally begin our explorations. I begin the book by more fully setting the stage for our journey by highlighting the significance of this issue and the need for a new classification of organizations (chapter 1). In order to provide the necessary background, the next two chapters cull research literature across multiple disciplines to paint a picture of what we know already about various types of hidden organizations (chapter 2) and to highlight key topics pertaining to organizational identity, reputation, image, branding, identification, anonymity, secrecy, and stakeholders (chapter 3). Building on this foundation, chapter 4 presents my own theoretical framework, which is truly the heart of this book. That model allows us to describe the transparent, shaded, shadowed, and dark regions in which organizations operate on the basis of three key dimensions: organizational visibility, member identification, and relevant audience. Chapters 5 through 7 delve into that framework to talk about specific characteristics and organizations operating in both transparent and dark regions—as well as every shaded and shadowed space in between. It is in these chapters that we really begin to get a feel for many of the similarities and differences across hidden archetypes as we consider detailed examples of each. Finally, chapter 8 draws conclusions, discusses implications, and suggests directions for the continued exploration of this topic. By this point, I hope that the reader will see the need to rethink organizations to better emphasize the problematic nature of communicating one's identity—especially for the anonymous agencies, backstreet businesses, covert collectives, and other hidden organizations found (and not so easily found) in our world today.