Chapter 3
Invisible Domains and Unexplored Terrains:
A Multi-Level View of (In)Appropriately Hidden Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Organizational communication scholarship can provide valuable insights into a range of hidden organizations; thus, the domain of our field should be expanded to not only include this hidden terrain but to reconsider and qualify knowledge claims based almost exclusively on more visible organizations. This essay describes in some detail three broad types of hidden organizations and the reasons why each must be examined: inappropriately hidden, appropriately hidden, and ambiguously hidden. Additionally, an argument is made for a multi-level view of these hidden entities that considers not just the broader organization but also various groups/chapters/cells, individual members, and other levels.

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, organizational communication scholarship has primarily examined large for-profit corporations, various small- and family-businesses, a variety of governmental agencies, and several nonprofits/NGOs. All these represent relatively visible organizations in the contemporary landscape that actively communicate their identity to various audiences. As a result, most of our theories and knowledge claims

about organizational communication emerge from our understandings of and research about these relatively conspicuous collectives.

Yet, the organizational domain is much broader, and deeper, than our prior efforts would suggest—because there is another set of organizations hidden largely beneath the surface that remain relatively invisible to society and scholars alike. These include, for example: secret societies, anonymous support programs, hate groups, terrorist cells, covert military units, organized crime, gangs, parts of the underground economy, front organizations, obscure political fundraising groups, shelters for the abused and marginalized, organizations characterized by dirty work, activist movements, stigmatized businesses, and even certain hidden enterprises in quiet office parks. All of these represent what are usefully called hidden organizations, which communicatively conceal core aspects of themselves from various audiences.

There are a few signs organizational communication scholars are starting to transition into a greater awareness about these organizations. Recent work examining both alternative organizations (see Parker, Cheney, Fournier, & Land, 2014) and the dark side of organizations (see Linstead, Maréchal, & Griffin, 2014) represents valuable extensions to our thinking about the nature of organizations and organizing processes. Emerging conversations in our field about the limitations of transparency point to a recognition that full disclosure and visibility are not always desirable goals (see Christensen & Cheney, 2015; Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015; Flyverbom, 2016). More specifically, recent work on clandestine organizations (see Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2012; Stohl & Stohl, 2011) and books about hidden organizations (Scott, 2013) and organizational secrecy (Costas & Grey, 2016) have helped to shed scholarly light on this shadowed subject. The recent publication of a special issue of *Management Communication Quarterly* on Hidden Organizations (see Scott, 2015) is perhaps the clearest signal that our field is beginning to pay attention to these more invisible terrains.

Although a few articles and books, along with a special issue, represent important steps, a broader transforming of our field to better consider both visible *and* invisible organizations will require more sustained efforts. These hidden organizations represent an especially important area of study given how little is known about them and their members. As Scott (2013, p. xi) notes, there are consequences of being hidden and being revealed for these organizations:

…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.

Organizational communication scholarship can provide valuable insights into a range of hidden organizations; thus, the domain of our field should be expanded to not only include this hidden terrain but to reconsider and qualify knowledge claims based almost exclusively on more visible organizations. To aid in this transformation, this chapter attempts to make two contributions. First, three broad types of hidden organizations and the reasons why each must be examined are presented in detail: inappropriately hidden, appropriately hidden, and ambiguously hidden. Second, the case for a multi-level view of these hidden entities that considers not just the broader organization but also various groups/chapters/cells, individual members, and other levels is made. The chapter concludes with a framework and some future research directions about these hidden organizations and the extent to which they communicatively conceal themselves from various audiences.

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