

Bringing Hidden Organizations Out of the Shadows: Introduction to the Special Issue

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**Bringing Hidden Organizations out of the Shadows:
Introduction to the Special Issue**

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Bringing Hidden Organizations out of the Shadows:

Introduction to the Special Issue

This special issue of *Management Communication Quarterly* examines *hidden organizations*, where the identity of the organization and/or its members is heavily concealed, for a variety of reasons, from various audiences. They are collectives organizing in shaded, shadowed, and dark regions of the organizational landscape (see Scott, 2013). These hidden organizations might include, but certainly are not limited to, covert special missions units, secret or secretive government agencies, clandestine operations, spy rings, eco-terrorist groups, other terrorist cells, the Mafia or other organized crime syndicates, various street gangs, merchants and others operating on the dark web, pirate organizations, illegal animal fighting rings, the Ku Klux Klan, various hate groups, twelve-step support groups, various other online and offline support groups using anonymity, domestic violence shelters, the Underground Railroad or other similar assistance networks, Scientology, cults and other new religious movements, Anonymous and certain other hacker/hacktivist organizations, various secret societies and select fraternal organizations, Skull and Bones, certain political action committees, sweatshops, front or anonymous organizations, shell companies, various aspects of the informal economy, bathhouses and certain elements of the sex industry, stigmatized organizations, highly specialized small businesses that remain largely invisible to most, and other organized collectives perhaps so hidden that they are completely unknown to outsiders.

These organizations are not completely hidden from us. Relatively regular media attention and public conversations about various concealed terrorist organizations, collectives like Anonymous and WikiLeaks, secretive corporate donors to political campaigns, anonymous 12-step support groups, and covert operations by special military units all suggest that these

otherwise hidden organizations represent an important and consequential segment of our world. Yet, in many ways, we as citizens, consumers, and students of organizations have failed to seriously and adequately consider these various forms of hidden organizations—creating both missed opportunities and potential dangers. Among several explanations for this blindness, let me highlight three.

First, our scholarly focus on the familiar organizational foreground of predominantly large for-profit businesses, easily recognized governmental agencies, and a few high profile nonprofits/NGOs contributes to a lack of awareness of what may be an even larger arena of other less visible collectives. Additionally, we instruct our MBAs and other graduate students about the importance of identity and image, various professional associations conduct training workshops to improve skills in reputation and brand management, and we draw primarily on these recognizable organizations in our teaching and consulting—all of which diverts our scholarly attention away from more hidden collectives. Second, we live in a world where many organizations dedicate substantial resources to create name recognition and establish visual identities that enhance their reputation. This is the same world where we find a general bias for openness and transparency (see special issue by Hansen, Christensen, & Flyverbom, 2015)—and substantial suspicion of anything hidden or secret. That societal discourse perpetuates certain perspectives that tend to either overlook hidden organizations or dismiss them as problematic and deviant. A third reason for the lack of attention to hidden organizations is that existing methods for knowing privilege more visible forms of organization. Certainly, their somewhat hidden nature often makes accessing information about them challenging—leading scholars to pursue more convenient samples and cases. Consequently, there has been a lack of research on these backstreet businesses, covert collectives, and other hidden organizations in our mainstream

scholarship despite the fact that these are some of the most poorly understood organizations—and therefore in the greatest need of empirical study.

Thus, a contemporary view of organization, organizations, and organizing must look beyond the familiar, formal, and recognizable to better incorporate other types that may be far less visible, yet just as important, into our scholarship. We must at least partially push back on the discourses that have favored transparency and openness over secrecy and concealment to better understand the complex role of hidden organizations in a global society. We need to tackle the methodological challenges associated with more hidden organizations so that we can better articulate how these collectives hide and how that relates to other organizational and communicative processes. Of course, we must do all this because these various hidden organizations are potentially quite consequential. As a result, they must be integrated into mainstream thinking about organizations by scholars, policy-makers, and everyday citizens.

This special issue hopes to move us forward in addressing these concerns by providing data-based research on range of under-examined organizations characterized in large part by their hidden nature. A communicative focus is especially warranted here for several reasons. Hiding an organization or its members is fundamentally about efforts to conceal one's identity through certain communicative strategies. A communication-based view is also useful in thinking about how members manage tensions related to concealment and revelation in/through their talk and written messages. Furthermore, a communication-based perspective allows us to better see hidden organizations in more process-oriented terms—as they engage in hiding practices that allow them to vary the degree of hiddenness with various audiences/situations.

Background on This Special Issue

This special issue has been shaped by several earlier scholarly efforts to begin

highlighting hidden organizations in the fields of communication and management. Each of these not only influenced some of my own thinking about what we should be doing in this emerging area, but also linked me to a diverse set of thoughtful scholars with overlapping interests who would ultimately play a role in this special issue. The first of those was a 2011 panel at the annual convention of the National Communication Association titled “Clandestine Collectives and Secret Societies: Communicative Perspectives on Hidden Organizations.” On this panel I joined several other communication scholars doing work in this space (Cynthia and Michael Stohl at UC Santa Barbara, Angela Trethewey then at Arizona State, and my own colleague Jack Bratich at Rutgers). It was here that Trethewey first suggested the time might be right for an edited issue on this topic. The following year I organized a second panel on this issue for the 2012 Academy of Management Convention in Boston. Titled “Backstreet Businesses, Covert Collectives, and Beyond: Unmasking Hidden Organizations,” this session linked me to a wider range of management and organization studies scholars whose work I found relevant (Kevin Corley at Arizona State, Paul Godfrey at BYU, Bryant Hudson at Florida Atlantic, and Dennis Schoeneborn then at Zurich). Those connections would later lead to involvement in Godfrey’s invited summit on the informal economy in 2014 (where I would network with scholars such as Justin Webb, now at North Carolina-Charlotte) and a couple talks I would give about these issues that same year at Copenhagen Business School (CBS) at the invitation of Schoeneborn (now on faculty at CBS) and Hans Hansen (who helped connect me to Mikkel Flyverbom at CBS and Jana Costas at Free University of Berlin).

In the midst of all this, my book on hidden organizations was published (Scott, 2013), which helped to further establish the relevance of this topic for organizational communication and management scholars. For me, that project also revealed the need to not only highlight a

wider range of scholarship on this topic, but also try and publish more data-based work in this area. That need and the earlier conversations about some sort of edited work in this area led me to pitch the idea of a special issue to *Management Communication Quarterly* editor Ling Chen. Fortunately, she was very receptive to the proposal and a call for papers was first announced in spring 2014. In that call I noted that this special issue seeks to unmask some of these hidden organizations and to initiate a scholarly conversation about these collectives as a way to stimulate additional work on this important part of our society. I also noted that special consideration would be given to submissions reporting original data utilizing any appropriate method (indeed, all five of the pieces published here report their own analysis of data).

The 15 submitted manuscripts revealed some substantial and exciting diversity. The hidden organizations included secret churches, hidden labor by women business owners, prostitution work, hacker groups, gun show collectives, hidden online communities, dormant disaster response organizations, and various terrorist/extremist cells. Methods ranged from experiments, survey questionnaires, and content analysis to a range of more qualitative approaches (including interviews, participant observation, and ethnographic fieldwork). In general, the submitters to this special issue were not the usual suspects; instead, they revealed a next generation of scholars whose work in this area seems poised to now begin emerging from the shadows in which it was previously hidden. The contexts and authors in those submissions represented locations ranging from Singapore and China to Sweden and Pakistan (not to mention cyberspace). Even though all the authors and all but one of the hidden organizations that are actually published here are U.S.-based, this is clearly an emerging area of scholarship with global relevance and substantial room for scholarly growth.

Overview of Special Issue Articles

The selected submissions for this special issue shed some much needed light on a set of hidden organizations and their largely concealed practices by highlighting collectives of a different breed and, perhaps, purpose. The five articles that follow examine a wide range of hidden organizational contexts: the terrorist organization al-Qai'da, legal brothels, a nonprofit shelter for especially marginalized persons who are homeless, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and one of its covert COINTELPRO operations, and hidden organizations within an online crowd-based community. These organizations also illustrate the vast range of public reactions to hidden organizations. Most would view homeless shelters as hiding for appropriate reasons and terrorist organizations as hiding inappropriately; but the organizations examined here also point to more challenging situations: generally respected government agencies (FBI) with generally unaccepted covert operations, problematic brothels that may be far more acceptable than alternative forms of prostitution, and generally appropriate groups of online reviewers that may become problematic as we start to better understand their potential influence and purpose.

Given the emerging nature of this area, it is not surprising that the articles in this special issue are not generally focused on testing established theories. Yet, they are each grounded in theory-based work. The lead piece represents the most explicit example of this through its examination of the four flows model in the communication as constitutive of organizations (CCO) perspective. Some of the other work draws specifically on models of dialectical tension and contradiction in organizations. Several other articles are grounded in literature and frameworks surrounding secrecy, anonymity, transparency, stigmatized organizations, and the communication of organizational and individual identity. Methodologically, they illustrate a

diverse range of approaches to acquire what can be difficult to obtain data. Several pieces examine existing traces of the organization's actual communication that eventually became publicly accessible (e.g., internal memos, typed letters) to directly assess various aspects of these messages as they pertain to hiding. Other research relies on interviews, various degrees of participant observation, and fieldwork as a means to explore communicative strategies for hiding and to better understand such processes as revealed in the talk of organizational members. Considering the nature of the data, it is not surprising that analytic approaches tend to center on various forms of content coding and more thematic analysis using grounded theory.

Collectively, these articles address several key research questions that help us better understand not only these hidden organizations, but also the communicative processes at work here. These articles ask about tensions of visibility-invisibility and about the revelation-concealment dialectic for organizations and their members. They examine management of stigma and identity as well as communication strategies for hiding. Some even ask how communication is used to facilitate the dissolution of more problematic hidden organizations. As one might expect, these pieces collectively raise far more questions than they formally ask or answer; but, in doing so they are adding significantly to our scholarly conversation so that research on hidden organizations is itself not quite so hidden.

It is tempting to try and classify each of these organizations using Scott's (2013) framework, which uses three dimensions (recognized-anonymous organization, expressive-silent member affiliation, and local/limited-global/public audience) to talk about the communication of identity by these organizations and their members to various audiences. For example, the pieces on the nonprofit Assisi House and the Yelp Elite Squad both describe a relatively anonymous organization with a local audience, but whose members are relatively expressive about their

affiliation with the organization. Conversely the other pieces describe organizations that appear much more mixed in terms of organizational visibility with members who are relatively silent about their affiliations (although the relevant audience for each varies). However, one of the key takeaways from these submissions is that hidden organizations can indeed be rather difficult to clearly classify as they manage shifting tensions between visibility and invisibility, as they alter strategies to fit various audiences, and as they conceal certain organizational elements within otherwise recognizable organizational entities.

Let me briefly mention three other broad observations that this collection of articles reveals. First, being hidden requires communicative effort. The organizations examined here use a range of communicative strategies that help to conceal themselves and/or their members from various audiences. In some ways, strategies related to misinformation, anonymous sources, or special communication channels may seem to reflect rather elaborate efforts; yet, in other ways, the hiding strategies are also rather administrative, at times mundane, and often not even digital. Although it is possible to be or become hidden without strategic intent, the organizations described in this special issue achieve their concealment largely through their varied communicative efforts. Second, the hiddenness of organizations is usefully understood as a function of identity management. Each of the organizations examined in this issue manages identity through practices such as adjusting who they are to various audiences, having multiple identities, disidentifying with certain identities, or keeping their identity entirely covert. In other cases, the identity management is about individuals linked to the organization and how those persons represent themselves to others within and beyond the collectives with which they are linked. Thus, identity management provides a means of concealment. Finally, it is important to recognize the key ethical challenges suggested by these articles (even if only one of them

examines ethics in any sustained way). These articles remind us that hiding may facilitate certain behaviors clearly judged to be unethical (e.g., terrorist attacks, covert operations by government to undermine legal social movement groups). But, they also suggest the complexity of judging the ethicality of concealment when it comes to hidden organizations. Hiding may allow one to better serve marginalized groups in need of support, more effectively conduct covert operations that could be for public benefit, or to protect workers in stigmatized organizations from public backlash. Just as we are beginning to recognize that transparency and openness do not always facilitate appropriate behavior, we must also recognize that concealment can encourage ethical behavior in certain situations. This is clearly an area in need of more attention.

Acknowledgements and Closing

Producing a special issue such as this involves a team of people. I am very grateful to MCQ Editor Ling Chen and several people associated with that journal and Sage Publications for providing this opportunity and supporting the project along the way. I want to thank Frank Bridges (a doctoral student at Rutgers) for his help in designing the special issue cover. I would also like to thank all the authors who literally answered the call and submitted manuscripts to this special issue; though I could not publish them all, they have exposed me to the diversity of work on hidden organizations and I hope those authors will continue to pursue this important research.

I am especially grateful to those scholars who took the time to review manuscripts for this special issue. As evidence of the interest in this topic, all 30 reviewers I contacted about serving on the editorial board for this special issue responded affirmatively. These included the scholars I mentioned previously as influencing this work (Costas, Flyverbom, Godfrey, Hansen, Hudson, Schoeneborn, C. Stohl, M. Stohl, Trethewey, and Webb) as well as a set of others with expertise broadly relevant to hidden organizations (David Askay at Cal-Poly, Hamilton Bean at

University of Colorado-Denver, Steve Corman at Arizona State, Joelle Cruz at Kent State, Daniel Cochese Davis at Illinois State, Leonard Dobusch at Free University of Berlin, and Allison Weidhaas at Rider). A range of organizational communication scholars with expertise on the specific contexts, methods, or theoretical approaches employed by submitting authors were also vital to the reviewing efforts (Boris Brummans at Montreal, Caleb Carr at Illinois State, George Cheney at Utah, Scott D'Urso at Marquette, Andrew Flanagin at UC Santa Barbara, Matt Koschmann at Colorado, Chih-Hui Lai at Nanyang Technological, Laurie Lewis at Rutgers, Steve May at North Carolina, Amanda Porter at VU University Amsterdam, Tracy Russo at Kansas, Erik Timmerman at Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and Chiara Valenti at Aarhus). The comments from these reviewers have been of value not only to the many authors who submitted to this special issue, but also to me as an editor tasked with selecting and developing the pieces included here.

In closing, even though much of our scholarly attention is devoted to those organizations that try to make themselves highly visible to a range of stakeholders, we can no longer pay only minimal attention to clandestine terror organizations, secret government operations, invisible online hackers, underground aspects of the informal economy, and all the other hidden collectives found in contemporary society. Increasing our knowledge about them is essential as these hidden organizations become more common and more consequential. It is my sincere hope that this special issue will spur theoretical/conceptual efforts and additional research studies as we continue to bring these otherwise hidden organizations out from the scholarly shadows.

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Craig R. Scott (Ph.D., Arizona State University, 1994) is a Professor in the Department of Communication at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. His research examines issues of identity and anonymity primarily in various organizational contexts, with a specific interest in hidden organizations. He has published a book and dozens of research articles, conceptual pieces, and chapters on these topics. He is also the co-editor for the forthcoming International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication.