

# Between the secret and the discreet: organizational communication for the management of the Freemasonry (in)visibility

*Entre o secreto e o discreto: a comunicação organizacional para a gestão da (in)visibilidade da Maçonaria*

*Entre lo secreto y lo discreto: la comunicación organizacional para la gestión de la (in)visibilidad de la Masonería*

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## Abstract

The present study discusses communication strategies and practices of organizations in the context of managing their levels of (in)visibility in the current sociotechnical landscape. In this sense, the aim is to understand how Freemasonry – historically known for its secretive nature – interprets the current hegemonic regime of expanded visibility and manages (in)visibility in its organizational communication processes. To achieve this, the assumptions of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1982; Blumer, 1980) and theoretical contributions from organizational communication (Baldissera, 2009; 2017) and the notion of secrecy (Simmel, 1999; Despret, 2011) are used as the theoretical foundation. Methodologically, secondary data is extracted from a study conducted by Vinhola (2021), analyzed through the lens of Goffman’s stage/backstage metaphor (2002), along with the organizational communication dimensions proposed by Baldissera (2009). Through diagrams, the study highlights different strategies and operations of (in)visibility (defensive, offensive, counterattack, and veiled infiltration) employed by Freemasonry in heterogeneous interactional devices. The main inference is that the management of Freemasonry’s (in)visibility is grounded in a specific organizational logic, defined here as discreet communication.

**Keywords:** Organizational communication. Freemasonry. Secrecy. (In)visibility. Discreet communication.

## Introduction

The competition for visibility is not a recent phenomenon. However, it is a fact that we are increasingly driven by logics that promote and demand more visibility, especially in the media. Thus, even the habit of revealing intimate aspects to distant audiences has become common in what Thompson (2008) referred to as the “society of self-promotion”. However, acknowledging the regime of expanded visibility (Thompson, 2008) as the hegemony does not mean stating that all social actors are always striving for visibility. It is more likely that as these actors adopt the grammars of this regime, they also harness its potential to, when necessary, act to reduce their public visibility.

Within this perspective, considering the empirical objective of this study, we highlight that for organizations, as Baldissera (2017, p. 84<sup>1</sup>) points out, “[...] ‘being visible’ and ‘speaking of oneself’ are basic aspects of strategic organizational communication, which need to be fulfilled”, and on the other hand, the demand to “be in the spotlight” is also uncomfortable because it places them in a context of vulnerability (due to digital footprints and the risk of public attacks with higher visibility). Therefore, it is possible to assume that various dynamics of desires for (in)visibility intersect in society, creating different levels of opacity. Given that, imperatives of communicative behavior aimed at naturalizing being connected, self-expression, and self-presentation (Baldissera, 2017) still prevail. This requires us to recognize the visibility-invisibility binomial – (in)visibility – not as a matter of exclusion but as a dialogic pair in constant interaction (as we will explain later).

1 All references originally written in Portuguese have been freely translated.

For organizations, among other aspects, this configuration demands analytical competence of contexts and their translation into strategic management to achieve the desired levels of (in)visibility in each situation (even though it does not necessarily imply control). To expand this reflection based on empirical data, the present study selected *Freemasonry* as the object of study and its relationship with the current hegemonic regime of increased visibility. This is because it represents one of the most prominent organizational entities in terms of the desire for invisibility. Our aim in this research is to understand how Freemasonry manages (in)visibility in its communication processes.

Before we highlight some of the premises of this study and the results of the analyses conducted, we provide a brief overview of Freemasonry itself. First, it is worth noting that despite the significant differences in the rituals practiced by Masons in various countries, there are fundamental principles, symbols, and structures that are followed worldwide. In this regard, so-called *regular Freemasonry* is organized into *lodges* (Azevedo, 1997), which are groups that meet regularly and have a degree of autonomy.

With that in mind, we emphasize the fact that Freemasonry is an initiatory organization because its members must go through a specific entry ritual, and they go through continuous training phases to progress through the so-called *degrees* within the order. It is worth noting that Masonic education is closely related to the individual's moral and intellectual improvement (Azevedo, 1997), highlighting its educational nature. In addition to the symbolic/ritualistic and educational/philosophical aspects, another historically well-known characteristic of Freemasonry is its dedication to philanthropy, one of the few 'external' activities for which the organization tends to seek visibility.

Considering the aims of the present study, another aspect worth highlighting is that over time, without revealing many aspects of its concreteness, Freemasonry has provoked various reactions in the public. Stimulated by an aura<sup>2</sup> fueled by secrecy, people have attributed different meanings to it, ranging from the idea of an extremely influential and active invisible power to the notion of something sinister, dangerous, operating in the shadows and the underground of society. Thus, amidst speculations and rumors, the organization has developed over centuries, and, like any social actor, it has been affected by changes in regimes of visibility, compelling it to cede its desires for invisibility. It is worth noting that, while secrecy has always been a structural element of the organization, this does not imply that such secrecy cannot be 'renewed' to some extent. An example of this change is the understanding that the identity of members in this organization – which was closely guarded for a long time – is now more accessible, as we can easily observe in social media profiles.

In this configuration, Freemasonry sets an example within the concept of the dialogical pair of visibility-invisibility. The organization simultaneously upholds the institutionalization of secrecy as a fundamental element and faces the pressure to be visible in a society that values self-promotion. In terms of communication, Freemasonry needs to coordinate strategic arrangements to maintain what has been established as secret and what can be made public.

After these considerations, some assumptions of Symbolic Interactionism are the main epistemic foundation employed to achieve the aims of the present study. We start from Mead's interactional matrix (1982) and Blumer's systematization – which are premises and root images (1980) to seek the complex perspective that this lens allows. Thus, we apply the circularity of the communicational phenomenon, a perspective that aims not to be limited to the situation but to explore the contextual, taking into account the present research scope.

The empirical data used here were originally collected and analyzed by Vinholá (2021) in a research project that included four different phases and procedures (to be fully explained later). In this particular study, we focus on the outcomes of the fourth phase, which involves a cross-sectional analysis of the results, as will be presented in a subsequent section.

### **(In)visibility, secrecy and organizational communication – a few postulates**

The concept of visibility refers directly to the sense of sight, as it is the most common relationship in our daily lives. However, as explained by Thompson (2008), visibility cannot be considered an isolated sensory dimension because the act of seeing comprises a broader spectrum in which cultural aspects and other references accompany the visual image. In addition to this symbolic dimension, in the current hegemonic regime of expanded visibility, it is also important to consider diverse footprints left in the digital environment.

As a complementary perspective in line with the reflection guiding the present study, we draw

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2 The idea of 'aura' here is understood based on Benjamin (1985), as the manifestation of a "distance", something that is both near and far, as it is inaccessible to those outside this enclosure, even though its existence is known.

attention to the relationship between the notions of visibility and invisibility, as it is impossible to consider one without an immediate reference to the other. It is always a choice that comprehends not only the extremes (completely visible and invisible), but also a wide spectrum of opacities. Therefore, rather than thinking in simple dichotomy, it is better to understand these notions as a dialogic pair, as we have emphasized. This understanding accounts for the “dialogic principle” of the Complexity Paradigm, which, as Morin (2000) explains, is linked to a complex association between two episodes that are simultaneously complementary and competitive. In this way, such a process considers a logic that goes beyond mere juxtaposition – it preserves duality within the context of unity, with the association of terms that would, seemingly, be dichotomous. Thus, visibility and invisibility, viewed as a dialogic pair, are always in a tensional relationship, in a kind of dispute that does not completely eliminate one or the other instance, instead resulting in different levels of illumination and opacity.

Consequently, in terms of management<sup>3</sup>, when reflecting on the constant attempts by organizations to regulate the levels of (in)visibility, it is also important to consider the notion of “secrecy”. For this purpose, we turn to Simmel’s approach (1999, p. 24), which understands secrecy as a neutral sociological form, above the value of its contents: “[...] a form that is continually receiving and releasing content: what was originally manifested can become secret, and what was kept hidden breaks that concealment”.

Simmel’s perspective (1999) also positions secrecy as a communicative dynamic, influenced by a series of attitudes and behaviors. This perspective comprehends secrecy as a kind of regulator of the dialogic pair of (in)visibility, in that it either releases or withholds certain content. In this regard, the contribution of Despret (2011) is pivotal, as this author sees secrecy as something that separates, revealing what “can” and what “cannot” be shown. The author explains, based on etymology, that *secretus* is the past participle form of *secernere*, which means to separate. From this linguistic root, we coin the concept secrecy as something that organizes what is revealed and what is hidden. Endowed with this organizing function, secrecy plays a simultaneous role in defining the content and controlling its access. Thus, secrecy exists to demarcate and, in a certain sense, also reveal what is concealed.

Despret’s perspective (2011) is connected to Simmel’s sociology of secrecy (1999) as it does not privilege the content itself but values secrecy beyond it. It is not about knowing what the secret is, but rather exploring what constitutes the secret and, most importantly, what it accomplishes. Without confining the secret to its content, it is less important what the secret allows or forbids – instead, what the secret creates and enhances is highlighted (Despret, 2011). Due to all that it “accomplishes” as a regulator of (in)visibility, we adopt the interactionist concept of secrecy (Simmel, 1999), given that in any relationship between individuals and/or organizations different forms of reservations are developed. Thus, without ever fully knowing the other, we construct diverse kinds of units of other characters based on the fragments that are made visible.

In this perspective, Goffman (2002) helps us understand the management of (in)visibility through his studies on representation, which start from the premise that in any interaction, individuals seek information from others to project the best way to act and thus “define the situation” they find themselves in. That is, there is a constant attempt to guide impressions and regulate the behavior of others. However, the other party in the interaction will also assess the projected behavior. The author calls these “others”, who contribute to defining the situation, as the “audience”.

An important element within this game of projection and impression management is what Goffman (2002, p. 29) refers to as the “front stage<sup>4</sup>”: “[...] the expressive equipment of a standardized kind intentionally or unintentionally employed by the individual during their performance”. When an individual takes on a specific role, they quickly realize that there is already a designated front stage for that role, and the audience expects it to be consistent.

Additionally, it is worth discussing that representations occur in defined “regions” (Goffman, 2002), which vary in terms of their level of limitation and the communication devices in which they are constituted. The “front stage region”, always characterized by a setting, is where a representation is performed. It exhibits patterns of how the actor interacts with the audience and how the actor’s behavior is perceived by the audience.

On the other hand, the “back region” or “backstage” is where things hidden from the audience can come to the fore. These are spaces where elements can be concealed, behaviors assessed and revised, and a sense of relaxation can prevail. According to the author, the front and backstage regions, each with distinct protocols, are separated by barriers, whose passages are always protected. When individuals from the

<sup>3</sup> The notion of “management” in this study is not reduced to a competency of control from a deterministic perspective. Instead, while paying attention to situations and contexts, it is invoked to describe the intentions and actions carried out by organizations considering their objectives, even though the unforeseeable is always present.

<sup>4</sup> According to Goffman (2002), the “front stage” is composed of the “setting”, which includes the artifacts that support or protect the action (furniture, decoration, etc.), and the “personal front”, which encompasses more intimate aspects of the individual-actor (clothing, body language, speech habits, etc.).

audience manage to cross these barriers, their untimely and unexpected presence tends to have an impact on the ongoing representation.

We emphasize that Goffman's (2002) conception goes beyond an individual's expressiveness. With the perspective that the definition of situations is a collaborative effort, there are individuals who cooperate with each other in the game of impressions. This is what the author refers to as the "team of representation": a group of individuals who collaborate in the performance of specific tasks or routines. This notion simplifies the application of the Goffmanian approach, which is focused on the institutional context, to achieve the aim of this study.

Furthermore, it is necessary to consider other constitutive processes of organizations, particularly organizational communication, which is understood as the "process of constructing and contesting meanings within the realm of organizational relationships" (Baldissera, 2009, p. 158). From this perspective, the organization is seen as a social construct carried out by different individuals who act as forces in structuring and stabilizing the organized entity (which undergoes continuous disruptions) through the multidirectional flow of meanings. In the context of complexity, and emphasizing the relational aspect, Baldissera (2009) argues that organizational communication needs to be understood within three tensioned and interdependent dimensions: (1) the "communicated organization", which includes authorized discourse and is often part of planned communication; (2) the "communicating organization", which, in addition to encompassing the dimension of the "communicated organization", also includes all other communication processes that occur whenever anyone or the public establishes a direct relationship with the organization; and (3) the "spoken organization", which encompasses all communication about the organization (referring to it) outside its official environments, therefore, indirectly.

Systems thinking is an important foundation for such understanding of organizational communication. Drawing from its early contributions in biology and moving over to the effort in 'translating' this framework into the social sciences (Capra, 2002), this approach reintroduces concepts such as chaos, disturbance, indeterminacy, and complexity. In this context, organizations, seen as networked living systems, interact with their environment, (re)constructing forms of survival and equilibrium in a continuous interplay of order and disorder. As self-generating living systems, organizations depend on and are influenced by their environment, without this leading to determinism. These are, therefore, systemic disturbances because, as living systems, organizations create meaning and learn (cognitively) in a way that they are not determined by the irritations of other social subsystems.

### **Communication, Interactions, and Management of (In)visibility in Freemasonry**

After having presented some of the assumptions of this study, in this subsection, based on research conducted by Vinhola (2021), we analyze some of the main communication movements and relationships with different audiences materialized by Freemasonry with the perspective of managing its (in)visibility from a communicational perspective. In order to do so, the present study mainly employs Goffman's (2002) stage/backstage metaphor in conjunction with the dimensions of organizational communication by Baldissera (2009b).

Furthermore, we reiterate that Vinhola's (2021) research consisted of 4 phases of methodological procedures. The first phase<sup>5</sup> of the study involved an analysis of online social network sites to examine the structured networks on Twitter related to the topic of Freemasonry. This analysis revealed that despite being frequently mentioned, the Freemasonry organization does not engage in conversations on this social network. Likewise, such result allowed us to highlight that there is no significant pressure from the public to expand Freemasonry's visibility levels. On the contrary, there is a substantial production of content about the organization by individual actors with no affiliation to the organization, and they do not seek any association with its official representations.

The second phase of the research involved a content analysis, following Bardin's (2011) methodology, of the official websites of the Masonic order to scrutinize what their authorized discourse made visible. This study allowed us to infer that Freemasonry is gradually moving, albeit cautiously and from a risk analysis perspective, towards making itself more visible. This is because, through the grammar of this media, there is better control over the information circulated about the organization.

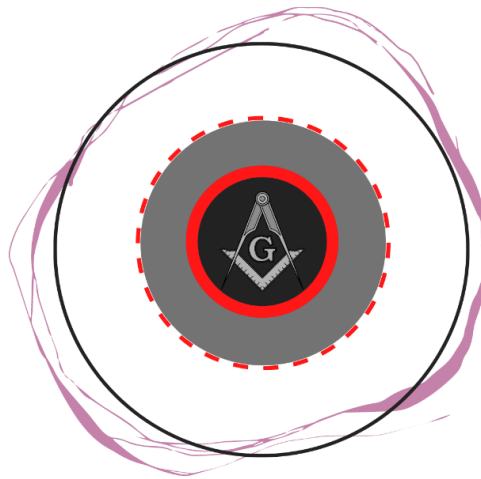
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<sup>5</sup> To analyze online social networks, the present study use the software Netlytic (netlytic.org) for both data collection and analysis. This tool is designed for the automatic collection of data from online social networking sites (in relatively stable structures).

In the third phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Masons at different hierarchical levels<sup>6</sup> to understand how they perceive themselves and Freemasonry in the current regime of heightened visibility. These interviews revealed that the organization does not have a formal and explicit communication policy. However, there is an implicit guideline that, although not formalized, reveals a tacit mastery over a specific communicational behavior to be followed, which is related to reducing visibility and condemns any excessive exposure. The data from the interviews also indicated that Masons are aware of the challenges posed by the current regime of heightened visibility, particularly due to concerns about the organization's continuity. The fourth phase consisted of a cross-sectional analysis that combined the results from the previous phases.

At this point, it is important to emphasize that, given the possible dimensions for this text, the emphasis will be placed on this fourth phase, as it assembles and articulates the results of the previous processes in a more complex and structured manner, allowing us to expand our reflections. With this clarification, supported by the empirical data and the theoretical foundations presented from an interactional perspective, the discussion on the results begins by presenting a diagram in Figure 1, resulting from the analyses conducted in the first three phases of the research. This diagram represents what we consider to be the foundational guiding logic of Freemasonry for managing its (in)visibility.

Figure 1 – Basic Logic of (In)visibility Management in Freemasonry



Source: the authors (2023)

The most prominent symbol of Freemasonry is displayed in the diagram above, which shows the **letter G surrounded by the square and compass**, within the black area, and it represents the Masonic temple. This temple is not limited to a territorial sense but is considered an exclusive space for the initiated participants, who have access to the content that remains in the realm of the **invisible** (the black circle) to others. Surrounding the letter G with the tools, represented by the continuous red line, we can see the protective barrier of **secrecy**. This barrier safeguards the organizational choices regarding what should remain invisible and creates the asymmetry between the initiated and the others. The gray area in the diagram corresponds **to the discretion**. It comprises elements that, on the one hand, were once under the veil of secrecy but currently are not as tightly controlled (such as the public identification of Freemasons). On the other hand, there are elements that were more visible in the past and are now approached with more discretion (such as involvement in politics). Assuming the premise that there are levels of secrecy within the organization itself, respecting hierarchical levels, we can understand the discreet as a second-level regulator for external audiences. In the diagram, the boundary of discretion is represented by the dashed red line, considering that individuals from external audiences can, at times, cross it and, as a result, gain access (even if limited) to some content.

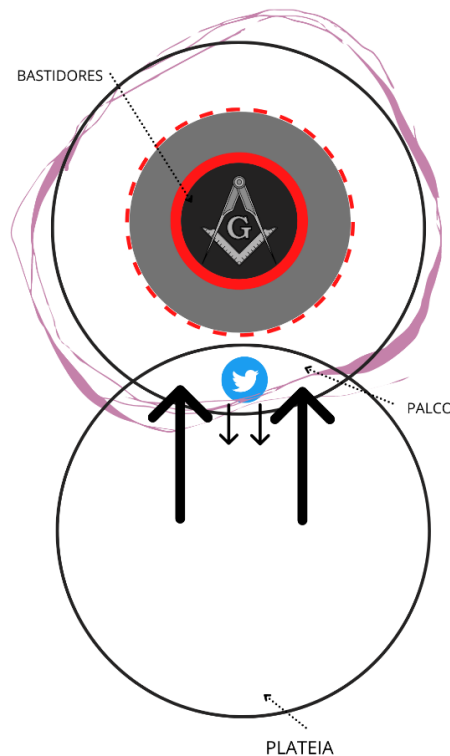
<sup>6</sup> We conducted ten interviews, collecting accounts from both initiates affiliated with the high administration of the Masonic power (regulatory bodies that group a certain number of lodges) of the Grand Orient of Rio Grande do Sul (GORGS) and their direct advisors, as well as initiates located in the lodges (fundamental subunits that make up the power). Among those, we interviewed two members of the high administration and two members of the Communication sector of GORGS. At the second level, we included two lodges. In each of them, we interviewed three initiates from different hierarchical levels: a Freemason who reached the rank of Master more than 10 years ago and who holds or has held the highest position in the lodge, which is that of Worshipful Master; a Freemason who has reached the rank of Master and has never held the position of Worshipful Master; and a Freemason whose initiation is more recent, who has reached, at most, the rank of Apprentice or Fellow Craft.

The white area corresponds to what is “unrestricted” by the regulations of secrecy and discretion. It represents the organizational directives towards the **visible**, as well as initiatives that escape their control. Surrounding this area of visibility, the black line represents the **boundary of the system itself**. Finally, the pink lines, which close around the organization like a nebula, refer to what we understand as the “aura” that accompanies Freemasonry in its historical process. Here, as we focus on the management of (in)visibility, we highlight the perspective of the dimensions of organizational communication in fostering this aura – through movements such as attempts at self-demystification and the valorization of secrecy. Therefore, we refer to it as **the strategic use of secrecy**, which intersects with the (re)creation of the organization’s collective imagination.

Freemasonry, as a living subsystem (Capra, 2002) of society, comprises zones of inter-systemic coupling guided by the protocols of different interactional devices. Besides that, it also experiences and generates disturbances in other social subsystems. In order to understand the dynamics of these interfaces, we will revisit the notion of a “region” (Goffman, 2002). In the Freemasonry subsystem, we understand that the backstage encompasses everything protected by secrecy. On the other hand, the front region consists of the elements that the organization wishes to make visible, as well as some issues and situations that escape regulation. The audiences (public) with whom it interacts depend on the specific interactional device on which the stage is set, as analyzed below.

Considering the Twitter interactional device (Figure 2), the linked area between the organization and the publics – identified by the symbol of the social network – represents the front stage region.

Figure 2 – *Twitter stage*



Source: the authors (2023)

According to empirical data (network analysis), the activity of Freemasonry on this platform is limited. Therefore, in Figure 2, this restrained posture is represented by small arrows originating from the front stage region, on a very restricted stage with limited informational content and little interest from the organization in establishing relationships. However, according to the perspective of relational communication, it is assumed that no audience is passive. On the contrary, especially in environments like Twitter, their ‘activeness’ is enhanced. In view of this, in the absence of significant inputs from the stage set by the organization – that is, without witnessing a representation compatible with this environment –, the audience takes on the role of protagonist (as represented by the large arrows in Figure 2). In this case, it resorts to points of support from the collective imagination to (re)create narratives for alternative stages, involving other directors, and developing new digressive scripts. Among other things, these references are often stereotypes of Freemasonry, such as that of a secret society, clandestine sect, or invisible power. In this regard, the organization is simultaneously

associated with negative stereotypes and recognized as a relevant and strategic political actor (as shown in Figure 3<sup>7</sup>).

Figure 3 – Alternative stages

Em resposta a @BradCasMello @Paulo09476429 e @jairbolsonaro

Eu já li aqui no Twitter que o Bolsonaro meio que foi obrigado e escolhê-lo para vice quando ainda estava internado devido a facada. O Mourão é grau 33 da maçonaria, acho q a maçonaria quer chegar ao poder

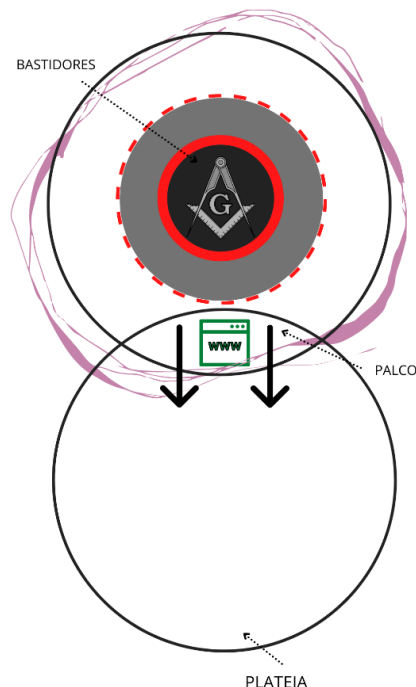
4:56 PM · 5 de jul de 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

Source: Tonello (2020)

Within the “communicated organization” concept (Baldissera, 2009), Freemasonry chooses to offer few elements for public interpretation. Such action consequently creates distance from the audience, generates presence through absence on these stages, and sparks speculation. In this configuration, the dimension of the “organization spoken about” (Baldissera, 2009) takes center stage, where individual actors fill the void left by the organization in defining the interactional situation.

Therefore, despite the fact that the organization relinquishes control of the Twitter stage, the “aura” surrounding Freemasonry continues to be nourished, and in this case, quite intensively. However, this does not appear to substantially disturb the system. On the contrary, silence seems to be a strategic approach to, on one hand, avoid public debate and the need to provide explanations and, on the other hand, maintain and/or reinforce its aura of mystery and secrecy. Thus, Freemasonry allows unauthorized voices to assert certain things, such as the influence of the movement on political figures, can be advantageous for the maintenance of its status and political power. Therefore, refraining from entering the scene and granting space for alternative stages emerges as a strategy that achieves broader and long-term objectives.

Figure 4 – Website stage



Source: the authors (2023).

Additionally, we observe another communicational situation (Figure 4) related to the interactions of the organization with audiences who have contact with its official websites. In these media, the front

<sup>7</sup> Which freely translates to: I have already read here on Twitter that Bolsonaro was kind of told to choose him for his VP when he was still in the hospital when he was stabbed. Mourão is Degree 33 in Freemasonry, I think the Freemasonry wants to take control of the country.

stage primarily addresses themes such as the moral/intellectual development of Freemasons, taboo subjects like secrecy/religion, and the recruitment of new members. The analyses reveal that the intention of this media representation is not only to obtain positive judgments about the organization but also to renew the organizational body. The “guests” for this presentation are kind of peculiar given that, unlike social networks, there is not the same interactivity between actors and the audience. In that sense, that explains the absence of arrows representing the movement of the audience towards the stage.

On the websites, holding a higher control over the representation (lower immediate risk), the organization expands its front stage region, includes more elements in the composition of the stage, and advances in its projection. This is why there are longer arrows originating from the front region towards the audience. In this scenario, on a stage with more elements, even sensitive subjects are set in motion, such as the “invitation” to initiation (Figure 5<sup>8</sup>).

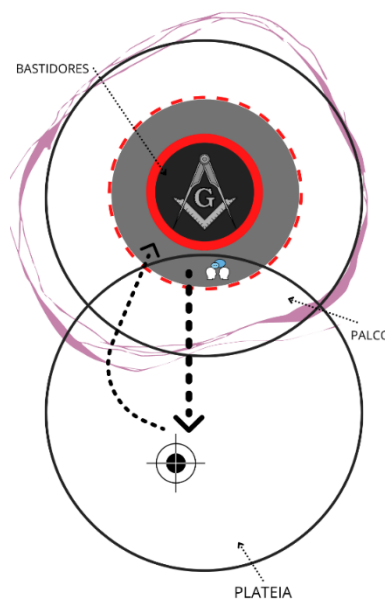
Figure 5 – Recruitment of new Freemasons



Source: Grand Orient of Brazil (2020)

This invitation reveals a strategic move aimed at viewers who are more interested in getting to know the backstage. It occurs due to the limit placed on the desire for visibility from the organization. In other words, visibility operations are carried out “up to a certain point” because even though the front stage region is expanded, the organization does not provide unrestricted access to its backstage. Without the possibility of offering more elements on the stage, it captures the most devoted fans of the audience and takes them to another space. Therefore, after analyzing the profiles of potential candidates for initiation or individuals representing target audiences, certain organizational agents extend invitations for these actors – represented by the “target” in Figure 6 – to, in face-to-face interactions, explore small “simulated portions” of the organization’s backstage. Examples of such situations are open sessions, organized by lodges to provide clarification on specific topics to designated audiences. Thus, the two dashed black arrows in the diagram in Figure 6 – entering the audience and returning to the gray area – respectively represent the capture of the selected viewer and their guidance into the zone of discretion.

Figure 6 – Recruiting Audiences



Source: the authors (2023).

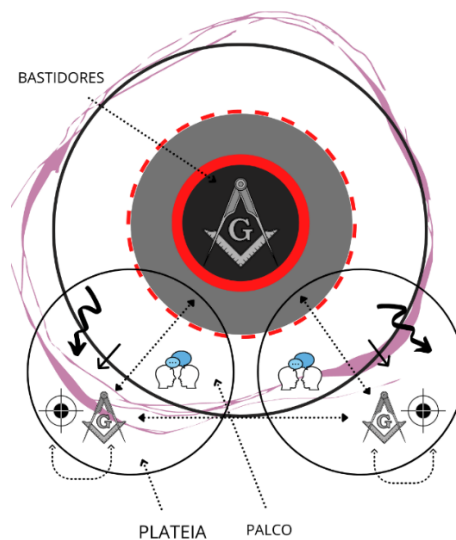
8 Which freely translates to: How to become a Mason (title): Given that, in case you are interested in “joining” Freemasonry, contact a Mason you know or a Masonic Lodge in your city. If you prefer, click the “Expression of Interest” button below and fill in your details. We will forward them for analysis by a Lodge near you.



It is important to emphasize that the open session is a simulation of the backstage, where the organization operates within the dimension of discretion (a region not accessible to everyone). This operation presupposes the creation of a nebulous environment, which contains elements generally absent from the stage offered to the general public but is still distant from the backstage. The strategy is to offer a passage beyond the stage, but it ends in a kind of antechamber, carefully arranged to reinforce the ‘aura’ surrounding the organization. In the antechamber, the guest is always guided, confined to a device filled with treatment protocols designed to program their perceptions to the fullest. The antechamber serves as a filtering area for determining individuals qualified to break through the barrier of secrecy and gain access to the backstage.

Also related to face-to-face interactions, the diagram in Figure 7 represents an inter-system integrating Freemasonry and two other organizations. The small arrows that go from the front region and point towards the audiences represent the measured stance of the official and planned communications of the organization being communicated (Baldissera, 2009). This stage consists of information strictly necessary for the official relationship between the organization and the surrounding systems. Beyond the planned communication, which includes strict guidance on the ideal discreet conduct of the Freemasons, most of the elements that make up the front region correspond to the fragmented logics of individuals (items displayed, such as rings or stickers on vehicles), processes of the communicating organization (Baldissera, 2009) that escape formality (sinuous, larger arrows), but lead to relationships.

Figure 7 – Face-to-Face Stage



Source: the authors (2023).

Furthermore, there are elements of the discretion zone that make up the stage for face-to-face situations and are hardly noticeable. This includes manifestations of the Masonic network, which operate silently and are only evident to actors of interest – represented by the targets. They are otherwise only perceptible if there are lapses or slips in the representation. This strategy is of utmost importance in the inter-systemic relations of Freemasonry, used for organizational approach and collaboration with systems with which it interfaces. Considering that Masons, as a rule, should not openly expose their membership in the order, when they occupy positions in other systems, they can maintain their affiliation in secrecy. In this way, by employing a kind of ‘infiltration agents’ – represented by the Masonic symbol – the organization nurtures relationships and interests and indirectly integrates and develops in different environments, including becoming a reference, albeit discreetly.

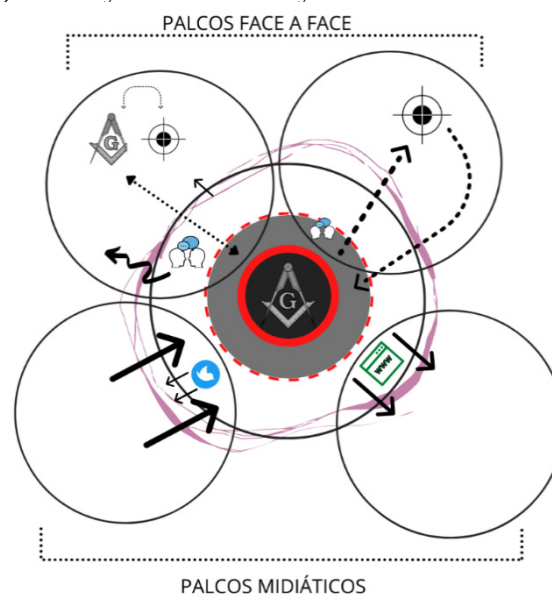
We also highlight that in Figure 7 there are two interface regions to represent the strategic positioning of communicative agents in different organizations. Among these targets, as reported in interviews (Vinhola, 2021), there are government agencies, companies, and other entities. In some organizations, there are few “infiltrated” Freemasons, who may even be tasked with recruiting new members. In others, with a larger number of initiated members, there are (sub)networks formed to achieve organizational goals, even within another system, with the support of a more advanced representation team (Goffman, 2002).

A key point to emphasize is that in this model of the communicational situation to be defined, the importance of the “communicated organization” dimension (Baldissera, 2009) is elevated, even though it is still in an unusual way when compared to the market imperatives of organizational communication. It

is a strategy of extreme sophistication that requires complex preparation of the agents who will execute it and achieves results that are measured differently. Arrangements, negotiations, and privileged information acquisition are examples of accomplishments within the context of the “communicated organization” dimension. These accomplishments are often not valued, largely due to the market-driven logic of official communication, which focuses “on the surface”. With a true “army” of “infiltrated agents”, the organization shifts its priorities in planning and, by operating with external systems, blurs the boundaries of interface zones. Although initially at a disadvantage in the current regime of enhanced visibility due to its tradition of invisibility, Freemasonry seeks to maintain or build an advantage through a strategy based on discretion. The stage may seem tiny, dark, and hard to observe, but the spectator may not realize that the actor could be right beside them.

Lastly, in Figure 8, we present the integrated representation of the various strategies and operations of (in)visibility conducted by the Freemasonry organization in heterogeneous interactional devices. This exposes the complexity of their management, which goes beyond regulating what should be protected or revealed by secrecy and extends to the constant regulation of the impressions left on their audiences.

Figure 8 – Management of (in)visibility in Freemasonry



Source: the authors (2023).

Among more defensive practices (regression on Twitter and face-to-face interactions), more offensive ones (intensified publicity on websites), counterattacks (recruitment of interested individuals on the website for further engagement in another environment), and even covert infiltration (activities of the discreet network), we can observe and attest the complexity of transitioning between various interactional platforms.

## Final words

When we observe the movements of Freemasonry, we can see that the dimensions of the communicated, communicative, and spoken organization (Baldissera, 2009) are updated and combined in the same devices, with demands by different actors. Thus, the examination of these heterogeneous stages, based on Goffman (2002), pays attention to the circularity of the communicational phenomenon (sequences and articulations), in terms of managing (in)visibility. Also, such analysis requires us to pay attention to the multidirectional flows and arrangements that configure organizational communication, with the risk of losing the richness of the systemic (dis/re)organizations that result from them.

The study also revealed that in order to address the parameters of the hegemonic regime of extended visibility, Freemasonry (re)organizes itself. In this way, the movement decides whether to advance or not in terms of visibility, offering façades with more or fewer elements, depending on the inter-systemic integration in which it occurs. Therefore, despite the ongoing disruptions generated by the hegemonic regime of extended visibility, it does not submit to it.

It is also essential to highlight the strategic use of secrecy in the spaces of visibility explored by Freemasonry, which aims to (re)fuel the imagination about the organization. This is because, even under the

pressure of the logics of the regime of extended visibility – whose imagination tends to reject roles related to secrecy – dissociating from the secretive nature implies a significant symbolic loss for Freemasonry. In the words of Despret (2011), it means to lose “what the secret makes it do”, especially the power granted to the organization by its public. In this strategy, at times, the organization takes center stage, while at other times, it allows the audience to conduct the spectacle, often without even noticing, reinforcing this symbolism. Thus, even with advances in terms of visibility, Freemasonry truly desires to safeguard the structure of the organization for the exercise of power (addressed only in the Masonic temple). And this is possible primarily due to the aspect of discretion.

This second level of informational regulation is the key to the survival of a social/cultural system strongly characterized by the communicative dynamics of secrecy in today’s world. Without the strategic definition of a second informational barrier that allows the organization to engage in inter-systemic couplings under unconventional logics, Freemasonry would be at great risk of diminishing. This is the case especially if we consider terms of influence on society and, primarily, in relation to the very reason for existence of this organization, given that its institutional legitimacy is based on the possession of secrets. Discreet communication is, therefore, the aspect that generally characterizes the management of Masonic (in)visibility. As a foundation present in all strategies and operations for regulating (in)visibility, discretion reveals sophisticated forms of the organization’s communication, while also highlighting the complexity of the social roles played by Freemasons, requiring constant transitions between the “sacred” and “profane” aspects of life.

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