A Guide to Front Organisations' Role in Intelligence Operations

Javier Sutil Toledano ⋮ 19-24 minutes

Front organisations are groups or entities formed to conceal the true identity or agenda of the individuals or groups behind them. Their goals are political, social, or criminal—to create a false sense of legitimacy, independence, and public support.

Front organisations are important because of their ability to deceive and control public opinion and engage in activities that would be impossible under their real identity or goals. It's important to understand their nature and methods to detect and counteract disinformation campaigns, propaganda, and criminal activities that may threaten democracy, human rights, and public safety.

1. What is a Front Organisation?

A front organisation is created and controlled by another organisation. For example, intelligence agencies, organised crime groups, terrorist organisations, secret societies, prohibited organisations, religious or political groups, advocacy groups, or corporations.

Individuals or larger organisations often create them intending to make them appear as independent, grassroots organisations or charities. However, in reality, they control or fund these organisations.

([source](#)).

Video explaining what a front organisation is. Credits: Stuff They Don't Want You to Know.

1.1 Types of Front Organizations

Front organisations have different shapes and sizes, but they share a common factor. They aim to conceal the true identity or agenda of the individuals or groups behind them. They also create a false sense of legitimacy and credibility.

Signs of a front include opaque funding sources or leadership, promoting the interests of a particular group, and lack of genuine grassroots support.

The main two types are front companies and front groups, but these, in turn, can take various forms:

1.1.1 Front Company

The first type is called a Front Company. These are legitimate businesses that are used to conceal the true identity or agenda of the individuals or groups that control them. Agencies may use front companies in espionage or other covert activities (source).

A subtype of a front company is a shell company. People create them to conceal the true ownership or control of assets or transactions. Criminal organisations often use shell companies in money laundering and other illegal activities (source).

1.1.2 Front Group

The second type is **Front Groups**. These are organisations that appear to be independent voluntary associations or charitable organisations.

People and entities create front groups for a variety of reasons. These include the promotion of a specific political or social agenda, the creation of a false image of public support, masking the true identity or agenda of the individuals or groups that control them, the commission of criminal activities, and sharing propaganda or disinformation to influence public opinion or create chaos.

Some subtypes of a front group, depending on what their objective is, are:

- *Astroturfing groups*: These are fake grassroots organizations that are created to promote a particular political or corporate agenda.

- *Propaganda organizations*: These are groups that are created to spread propaganda or disinformation on behalf of a particular individual or group.

- *Advocacy groups*: These are organizations that are created to promote a particular political or social agenda.

- *Charitable organizations*: These are organizations that are created to provide charitable services or support.

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1.2 Purposes of Front Organizations

People can use front organizations for different purposes such as political campaigning, public relations, propaganda, espionage, and criminal activity. However, they often establish them to influence public opinion or policy, or to provide cover for covert operations.

Front organisations can serve both legal and illegal functions. Intelligence agencies may use front organisations to gather information or conduct covert operations. Organized crime groups use front organizations to launder money or engage in illegal activities. Political parties or interest groups also control front groups, mainly for political reasons and to look independent.

1.2.1 Use by Intelligence Agencies

Intelligence agencies commonly use front organizations to provide "cover," credible professions, and means of income for their covert agents. They may include respected organisations like charities, religious institutions, or news media outlets as well as "brass plate corporations". These only exist to give a person a believable past, occupation, and source of money (source).

1.2.2 Use by Organized Crime

Organisations involved in organised crime tend to operate legitimate businesses. For example, casinos with gambling licences, construction firms, hair salons and karaoke bars, restaurants and bars, billiards clubs, or dock-loading businesses. These are front companies that give these criminal groups the ability to conceal the source of their illicit revenue.

Front companies also offer compelling cover for criminal activities like prostitution, extortion, drug trafficking, illegal gambling, and drug use (source).

1.2.3 Use in Politics

In politics, people may refer to a group as a front organization if they believe its leadership or objectives are dishonest, or if it tries to conceal extremist viewpoints within a seemingly moderate group. As mentioned earlier, some special interest groups use astroturfing as a tactic to present their lobbying as a grassroots movement (source).

1.2.4 Use by Corporations

Certain industries, mainly those related to the food, medicine, and energy sectors, create front organisations to speak out on their behalf. Several pharmaceutical firms use "patients' groups" as front corporations to persuade legislators and healthcare professionals to use their medications (source).

1.3 Significance

The topic of front organisations is critical because their deceptive tactics make them difficult to detect. It is critical to investigate them because they can manipulate public opinion and policy decisions, resulting in significant societal consequences. Exposing them promotes transparency and accountability while also preventing potential harm from these organisations.

2. Why are Front Organisations important?

The topic of front organisations is important because it sheds light on a common strategy used by organisations to manipulate public opinion and advance their agenda.

The tobacco industry uses front groups to minimize smoking's health risks and hinder regulation. They fund biomedical research front groups to generate favourable academic tobacco research that supports their positions (source).

According to SourceWatch.org, some of these groups are the Tobacco Industry Research Committee, which was succeeded by the Council for Tobacco Research (CTR), and the Center for Indoor Air Research (CIAR).

Another example is the use of front groups by the fossil fuel industry to promote climate change denial and postpone action to address it. According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, the top lobbyist for the fossil fuel industry in the United States secretly ran more than a dozen front groups in an attempt to undermine forward-thinking climate change and clean technology policy (source).

Understanding front organizations is crucial as it allows readers to be more discerning of the information they receive and make sound judgments. Recognizing these groups' potential biases and concealed intentions can aid readers in assessing the reliability and trustworthiness of the information they offer.

2.1 The World of Intelligence

For those in the Intelligence Community (IC), defence and security sector, being aware of this issue is also important. The use of these organisations is also very common and useful in the intelligence world, for several reasons:

1. The use of front organizations allows intelligence agencies to operate covertly without arousing suspicion or drawing attention to their activities.

2. They also provide a way of maintaining plausible deniability if someone discovers their activities. It is also a way to shift the blame.

3. Additionally, intelligence agencies may partner with private corporations to leverage their technical capabilities to address national security issues.

For example, in 1994, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) established Brewster Jennings & Associates as a front organisation to conceal the activities of its agents (source). The FBI also admitted using at least thirteen front companies to conceal their use of aircraft to observe criminal activity in the United States (source).

According to the US Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, between the 1930s and 1940s, the Comintern (Communist International) founded 82 front organisations in the US (source). During the Cold War, Soviet intelligence also compromised several Western peace movements (source).

3. How to Approach Front Organisations

The best approach to this issue is from an investigative point of view. That is, we want to identify front organisations. Here are some practical tips on how to approach the topic:

1. **Identify goals**: First, clarify your goals related to front organizations before taking action.
2. **Conduct research**: Use reliable sources, such as non-profit databases, financial reports, and news articles, to conduct thorough research on potential front organizations.
3. **Note red flags**: While researching, take note of red flags that may indicate an organization is a front. Document any evidence supporting your findings.
4. **Seek legal advice**: If you have concerns about legality, seek legal advice.

5. **Stay informed**: Keep up-to-date on news and developments related to front organizations, particularly in your industry or field of interest.
6. **Take action**: Depending on your goals, take appropriate action. For example, reporting to authorities, speaking out, or disassociating from the front organization.

By following these practical tips, readers will be able to effectively research the issue of front organisations. Furthermore, it will help to identify potential risks and legal implications.

Scientology Infiltration into Society: Front Groups

This video shows how to detect and unmask front groups, in this case, those used by the Church of Scientology. Credits: Chris Shelton, MSc.

4. Tips and Tricks to Investigate Front Organisations

Here are some tips and suggestions from experts to help readers get the most out of their research work on the topic of front organisations:

- Start with a clear **research question** or objective to guide your efforts.
- Use a **variety** of **sources**, including government records, financial disclosures, news articles, and social media.
- Pay **attention** to the organization's **funding** sources, leadership structure, and activities.
- Look for **patterns of behaviour** or connections to other organizations.
- **Document** all of your **findings** and sources to support your conclusions.
- Consider **collaborating with** other **researchers** or organizations to pool resources and expertise.
- **Be cautious** and consider seeking **legal advice** before taking any actions that could have legal implications.

5. Common mistakes to avoid when investigating Front Organisations

Here are some common mistakes that people make when attempting to investigate front organizations and how to avoid them:

- **Failing to do proper research**: Avoid misunderstandings by conducting thorough research using reliable sources like nonprofit databases, financial reports, and news articles.
- **Acting without legal guidance**: Consult with an attorney to protect yourself and your organization.
- **Failing to report findings**: Report your findings to relevant authorities or speak to the media to prevent the organization from continuing harmful activities and protect others.

6. Tools and resources for Investigating Front Organisations

The following tools and resources can help individuals research and evaluate organizations that may be front. They can also help identify potential risks and legal implications associated with involvement with such organizations.

- [Nonprofit Explorer by ProPublica](): This is a free online tool that allows you to search for and view financial information and tax returns for nonprofit organizations in the United States.

- [Charity Navigator](): This is a nonprofit organization that evaluates and rates charities based on their financial health, accountability, and transparency.

- [SEC Edgar Search](): This is a free online database maintained by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). It allows you to search for and view financial reports and other filings by publicly traded companies.

- [GuideStar](): This is a nonprofit organization that provides information on nonprofit organizations. It includes their mission, programs, financial information, and leadership.

- [IRS Tax Exempt Organization Search](): This is a free online database maintained by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). it allows you to search for and view information on tax-exempt organizations in the United States.

- [The Center for Responsive Politics](): This is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization that tracks money in U.S. politics and its effect on elections and public policy.

7. Frequently Asked Questions about Front Organisations

The first sections of this article should have addressed any questions regarding what a front organization is, how they operate, and why people use them. Other questions that may arise are:

How can I identify a front organization?

Front organizations can be identified through investigative journalism, public records, and online research. Is important to look for red flags, for example,

- Lack of transparency about funding sources.
- Lack of a clear mission or purpose.
- Ties to a particular individual or organization.
- Use of similar language or messaging as other known front organizations.
- Resistance to public scrutiny or disclosure.

How can I protect myself from front organizations?

The best advice is to be more critical of the information we receive and make better decisions. By recognising these groups' potential biases and hidden agendas, readers can better assess the credibility and reliability of the information they provide.

How do front organizations impact diversity and inclusion efforts?

Front organizations can have both positive and negative impacts on diversity and inclusion efforts. While some front organizations may advocate for initiatives that support underrepresented groups, others may establish themselves to oppose anti-discrimination policies or camouflage discriminatory practices as diversity and inclusion initiatives.

How can I report a front organization?

To report a suspected front organization, gather evidence and information, then contact the appropriate regulatory or law enforcement agency, media, watchdog organizations, or the organization directly. Protect your anonymity or confidentiality, and ensure you have enough evidence before reporting.

8. Advanced Techniques for Investigating Front Organisations

For those who want to take their investigative skills when dealing with front organizations to the next level, here are some advanced techniques and strategies:

- **Network with experts**: Building relationships with experts in the field can provide valuable insights and help you stay up-to-date on emerging trends and techniques.

- **Conduct deep-dive investigations**: Consider conducting deep-dive investigations that go beyond publicly available information. This may involve conducting interviews with key individuals, analyzing financial records, or using other investigative techniques.

- **Use advanced analytics**: Advanced analytics can help you uncover patterns and connections that may not be immediately apparent. Consider using tools such as network analysis, data visualization, or machine learning to

analyze data.

- **Collaborate with others**: Collaboration with other organizations or individuals can help you pool resources and expertise to achieve common goals.

- **Advocate for policy change**: If you are concerned about the impact of front organizations on society, advocating for policy change can be an effective way to address the issue.

9. Case studies for front organisations

Many examples demonstrate the importance of front organisations. From its use by intelligence agencies to its use by corporations. And also why is it important to investigate them.

Here we present two especially interesting cases that show that despite the effectiveness of the method, it is possible to combat these practices.

9.1 The Case of Crypto AG

Cryptoleaks − Wie CIA und BND mit Schweizer Hilfe weltweit spionierten | Doku | SRF Dok

Documentary on how the CIA and BND spied worldwide with Swiss help (English subs). Credits: SRF Dok.

Crypto AG was a Swiss company that sold encryption technology to more than 120 countries worldwide (source). The company was founded in 1952 and became the world's leading supplier of encryption technology. However, it was secretly owned by the CIA and the West German Federal Intelligence Service (BND) from 1970 until 1993. The CIA continued as its sole owner until 2018 (source).

Although the machines were encrypted, the CIA and Germany's BND rigged the company's devices to make it easy for them to break the codes that countries used to send encrypted messages. The operation had the code name "Thesaurus," and later "Rubikon," and is considered one of the most audacious in CIA history (source).

In 2020, an investigation conducted by The Washington Post, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), and Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen (SRF) exposed that Crypto AG was fully operated by the CIA and the BND. The investigation involved uncovering classified documents, conducting interviews with insiders, and analyzing financial records (source).

This case serves as an example of how investigative journalism and diligent research can uncover the true nature of front organizations.

(source)

9.2 The Case of the American Petroleum Institute

The American Petroleum Institute (API) is a trade association in the United States that represents the oil and gas industry (source). It was established in 1919 to represent the entire United States oil industry. The API drives the oil industry's relationship with Congress and is better known for its lobbying activities. It spent more than $3 million annually during the period from 2005 to 2009 on lobbying (source).

In 2021 Shell released a separate report revealing that they paid more than $10 million to the API. This was their single largest donation to political lobby groups the year before. Other major funders of the API are oil conglomerates that include ExxonMobil, Chevron, and BP (source).

API´s activities became clearer after Greenpeace secretly recorded an Exxon lobbyist in Washington referring to API as the industry's "whipping boy" to divert public and political attention away from individual companies. Many rightfully accused Shell and other major oil companies of using API to shield the industry (source).

This case highlights that corporations' public relations campaigns, claiming to care about the climate crisis, contradict the trade group's efforts to obstruct environmental legislation. However, it also shows that diligent research and active engagement in the issue can expose such organizations, leading to potential accountability and public awareness of the truth.

10. Conclusion

Given their secretive and often illegal nature, the issue of front organisations is complex and very important in the world of investigative intelligence.

Investigating their organisations requires efficiency, rigour, and collaboration. It may involve networking with experts in the field, conducting deep-dive investigations beyond publicly available information, using advanced analytics, collaborating with other organisations or individuals, and advocating for policy change. The cases mentioned above serve as a reminder of the importance of conducting thorough investigations to uncover hidden agendas and shed light on the true nature and motivations of front organisations.

Overall, thorough investigations are critical in protecting against potential abuse or manipulation by front organisations while also upholding the principles of fairness, inclusivity, and social progress.