The Corporate Rainmaker Persona

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**INTRODUCTION**

In American folklore, rainmakers are described as charlatans who promised to “make rain” in drought stricken areas. While Native Americans relied on the mystical powers of medicine men to bring much needed rain, farmers and land owners during the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s, often employed charlatan rainmakers who promised rain through seemingly magical, mystical, and technological incantations. Under this auspice, the charlatan rainmaker was ironically regarded with reverence, suspicion, and dependence.

Contemporary rainmakers are capable of making rain (e.g. money, positive public opinion and legitimacy) for themselves and their employers. Corporations, under the auspice of social responsibility, are concerned with being good community citizens. Fictionalized in John Grisham’s novel *Rainmaker* and John William Corrington’s poem of the same title, and championed in several sales trade books, corporate rainmakers arguably provide both the financial lifeblood and social ethic in many American communities. Given the increased dependence on corporations for both financial and social benefit, entire corporations (and not the CEO or other corporate leaders) often exhibit rainmaker characteristics.

Cheney identifies the corporation as occupying significant cultural influence because it must address multiple stakeholders. As such, all aspects of culture (individuals, institutions, laws, racial/ethnic groups, art, popular culture, etc.) are potential surrogates for the corporation and delineation between culture and the corporation is mute even when messages are delivered by individuals directly affiliated with the corporation. Corporations are interested in being “good” corporate citizens, and with the explosion of Corporate Social Responsibility efforts, corporations dictate political and governmental initiatives. CSR literature focuses on economic benefits, stakeholder responses, and legitimacy. This project departs from those traditions to offer a critical framework for analyzing corporate claims rather than analyzing the outcomes. This essay presents the construct of the Corporate Rainmaker Persona as an extension of the broader literature on corporate social responsibility. In doing so, I advance the CRP as a Ciceronian construct that extends the republican rhetorical style to include corporate claims of social responsibility and as a contribution to rhetorical/critical scholarship on neoliberalism and CSR. I begin by establishing the relevance of rainmaking and corporations in contemporary society and extend this discussion by profiling the characteristics of the CRP as a rhetorical/critical construct. Finally, I point out the implications of the CRP for society and future rhetorical scholarship.

**RAINMAKING AND RELEVANT RHETORIC**

In what specific ways, is the rainmaker ideal relevant in contemporary corporate rhetoric? First, corporations are highly relevant in contemporary society not only because of their economic influence but also because they desire and seek out public affinity. Corporations are incredibly relevant for rhetorical examination because they personify human characteristics, especially those communicative characteristics that bolster positive public
opinion. Corporations enact a persona that shapes public perceptions. Like the teenager, politician, parent, and teacher, corporations want to be liked. Like individuals, corporations say and do things for the purpose of being liked. In fact, the U.S. Supreme Court in its landmark ruling, *Citizens United v. FEC*, sanctioned that in restricting corporate speech, the “Government has muffled the voices that best represent the most significant segments of the economy.” Likewise, the charlatan rainmaker character in American folklore, understood that necessity to be liked. Making promises for much needed rain, for example, provides the charlatan rainmaker with an opportunity to capitalize.

Second, corporations and the rainmaker character both facilitate rhetorical persona and style. Persona is often associated with the rhetorical actor. The individual enacts a persona for a variety of rhetorical motives, and as Cicero teaches us, the impressions of a highly stylized persona bolsters decorum, respect, and legitimacy. Corporations understand that stylistic communication is necessary, especially in its advertising and public relations initiatives. Stylistic messages provide the corporation elaborate opportunities for performing its relevance and significance beyond merely the economic realm. In folklore, the rainmaker character not only tells needy people what they want to hear, but they do so in highly stylistic ways. Folklore tales of the rainmaker charlatan tell how the rainmaker’s language was often flamboyant, optimistic, and engaging.

Third, corporations and the rainmaker character are relevant because both engage the rhetorical constructs of persona and style as a way to be liked and also to shape economic and social dependence. Corporations inculcate both resource and cultural dependence by combining liberalism with nationalist tendencies (between large enterprise and development activities of the state). As local, state, and federal governments relinquish administrative and legal control to private corporations, the result is continuous hegemonic acquiescence and increased social polarization. Governmental (de) regulation and private corporate intervention exhibits neoliberal disparities in wealth and income, yet arguably because of CSR initiatives, these disparities are most often legitimized, naturalized and made to appear inevitable. In light of the broad, and albeit abbreviated, ways rainmaking and corporations are relevant I further outline the relevancy of the CRP and its emergence in corporate claims of social responsibility.

**CSR, Persona, and Cicero’s Republican Style**

CSR has emerged in recent years as both an academic construct and a business paradigm. Corporations engage in socially responsible behaviors in response to societal demands, the desires of influential stakeholders, and the ability of such activities to increase competitiveness and stock value. CSR messages allow a corporation to communicate its relevance to the economic, social, and cultural desires of a society and may help to silence critics and give voice to the positive attributes of a corporation. CSR claims demonstrate a careful fit within larger social and cultural values that sustain current business practices and existing individual consumptive lifestyles.

Persona is a rhetorical device that reflects the aspirations and cultural visions of both actors and audiences and refers to a “character type bearing some significant relationship to a context in which a rhetoric attempts
to affect, and an audience attempts make judgments...”. Corporations arguably enact a persona that stylistically establishes a “consciousness that organizes, controls, and directs what...is manifested.” The views presented in corporate messages do not represent those of the individual executives (e.g., CEOs). Rather the messages are attributable to the organization as a whole. As such, the corporate persona becomes part of a larger cultural discourse with no perceived authority, standards, or ethics thus making it ripe for organizational claims that cannot be easily refuted.

For Roman statesman and orator Cicero, the perfect orator had to be conversant with many subjects possessing broad cultural knowledge to invent arguments that identified with a variety of audiences. Cicero’s notion of probabilia, notes Barilli, “has an intrinsic historicity or temporal dimension: what is probable, and can be ‘followed’ today, may not be so tomorrow, or vice versa, as situations change.” The rhetorical construction of probability, in the Ciceronian vein, is highly stylistic fusing theory and practice, style and wisdom, decorum and science into a rhetorical persona that is eloquent and credible. But most of all, Cicero’s rhetoric embodies persona, decorum, and audience identification as persuasive principles.

Corporations act as contemporary republican actors and uphold the precepts of the republican style by facilitating a persona that appreciates rhetoric (attention to presentation and discernment of character, equation of polity with public talk, the rule of decorum, and the cultivation of liberal education). Civic virtue and decorum are central tenants of the republican political style. A decorous speaker follows closely the rules of public address upheld by society. Hariman notes: “This model includes appreciation of verbal technique, a norm of consensus, the embodiment of civic virtue, and a doctrine of civility that exemplifies the difficulties of facing contemporary liberalism.” For Cicero, this often meant forced politeness, even to the point of self-efficacy. The republican actor creates a reputation grounded in civic virtue, as demonstrated with rhetorical skill and timely action. Once the reputation of the actor is created the actor strives to act in accordance with that reputation. The republican stylist gains legitimacy through moral character.

The challenge for the republican orator is to translate the language of individualism into the language of civic morality. Hariman states, “The republican stylist today, as always, has to speak in a manner that can constitute the republican conceptions of speaker, audience, polity, and politics, and now has to do so for an audience who begin as liberal individualists.” The speaker has to overcome the audiences’ prior political status, their desire for autonomy, and their wish for liberty, which has most likely developed independently of public address. The republican orator can be thwarted by the cultural variability of today’s society. The diversity of society today makes it increasingly difficult to reach consensus because of the divergent interests, needs, and goals of publics. The premises of the republican actor are present in contemporary CSR discourse. Arguably, the construct of the Corporate Rainmaker Persona is the modern day embodiment of Cicero by corporation. To provide insight into this question, I present the basic tenets of the Corporate Rainmaker Persona.
Driving the Rain: Decorum, Reputation, and Civic Duty

The CRP is embodied by three broadly conceived characteristics of republican discourse. First, the CRP initiates a CSR discourse that predicates decorum. Second, the CRP constructs a reputation based on the neoliberal CSR initiatives that delegitimize governmental regulations. Third, the CRP promotes its civic duties and obligations through its public relations initiatives.

The CRP relies on decorum to provide an aesthetic worth and intrinsic merit to its discourse not only to deflect attention away from economic stagnation but to establish coherence and solidarity within the corporation that enables confidence in soon-to-be-profits. Leff points out that this “aesthetic” value of persona allows actors to view decorum as “a flexible principle that coordinates particular discourses as they simultaneously build internal coherence, refer to a context of facts and circumstances, and stretch outward to alter perception of that context.”

Sustainability is a prominent theme in CRS discourse. The CRP potentially aligns the corporation with sustainability because the concept of sustainability embodies—in corporate terms—partnerships, networks, and alliances with other profit-driven entities and governments. Similar to Cicero’s premise in reaching consensus, one must be concerned not only with one’s own interests but also respecting the interests of others. Following the norm of consensus, CRP relies on public discussion to determine policy. Agribusiness corporate giant Cargill’s CSR illustrates the decorum-consensus association. Cargill’s respectful CSR message states four initiatives: “Conducting business with integrity. Operating responsible supply chains. Working to feed the world. Enriching our communities.” The first initiative relates to business standards (“we obey the law, we conduct our business with integrity, and we are committed to being a responsible global citizen”). The second initiative to supply chains (that “respects people and human rights; produces safe and wholesome food; treats animals humanely...including protecting the land and conserving scarce resources”), the third to nutrition and world hunger (“developing more nutritious foods and collaborating with partners...to find long-term solutions to hunger”). Cargill’s fourth initiative is community engagement (“build vibrant and stable communities...access to education and provide training and schooling...”). Separately, the messages in Cargill’s initiatives are respectful in tone and purpose, but when considered as a complete CSR program operating equally with its corporate mission (“Cargill is committed to operating responsibly as we pursue our goal to be the global leader in nourishing people.”), Cargill’s tone and purpose is somewhat “priestly.”

Messages that emphasize responsibility, obligation, commitment, enrichment, integrity, and nourishment, seemingly reflect a priestly voice that is extensive, authoritative, and proactive. Cargill’s CSR engages a voice whereby consensus has no alternative; it is seemingly an ethical obligation of Cargill’s and other corporations committed to global citizenship. The CRP reflects a corporate-priestly voice whose authority is seemingly earned from consumers who are dependent on corporations, like Cargill. Like the rainmaker from American folklore, Cargill’s CRP’s discourse is commanding and convincing, seemingly able to influence consumers that respect and consensus are as equally important as revenue and profit.

The second characteristic of the CRP is reputation. This characteristic of the CRP is important for identification with its stakeholders. The CRP knows and understands the significance it
has on internal and external stakeholders, including consumers. Therefore, the corporation’s respectful messages also promise consumers a “good life.” The belief that corporations promise consumers a “good life” is vital for creating positive consumer public opinion and dependency. As Meister and Japp note, the “good life” is often a rhetorical construction instituted by corporations and governments for purposes of deflecting criticism away from inconsistencies. Therefore, a corporation’s reputation is often based on how clearly it associates its products and services with the promise of a “good life.”

Identifying its products as a means to a “good life” is clearly apparent in the Ford Motor Company’s corporate discourse on sustainability. Ford’s 2013 “Blueprint for Sustainability” introduced its corporate initiatives by expanding the definition of sustainability to not only include environmental and social/cultural themes (reducing greenhouse gas emissions and human rights), but also as vital to its corporate survival. “We now use the term more broadly to describe our sustainability strategy...reflecting the fact that our important sustainability issues are part of a complex system that interconnects our products, plants, people and communities in which we operate.”

Herein, Ford’s CRP does not request limited consumption by consumers, but points out that continued consumption (and corporate profits) is necessary for facilitating a “good life.” As evidenced by the “Blueprint for Sustainability” campaign, consumers are asked to believe that the discourse of Ford’s CRP produces the necessary products and services so consumers can continue to consume without changing consumption.

The third characteristic of the CRP is the promotion of civic etiquette. IKEA, a global retail leader in home furnishings and design, promotes its good corporate behavior in its 2013 sustainability report “People & Planet Positive: IKEA Group Sustainability Strategy for 2020.” The report outlines initiatives that emphasize the politeness and tact of the IKEA CRP. For IKEA, civic etiquette is a long-term business strategy that responds specifically to rapid global population increases and dangerous global climate change. IKEA’s CRP strategy reminds consumers that facing such challenges requires committed group work and that “a more sustainable life at home” requires that it

“...address the higher price of raw materials and energy, while driving down emissions and maintaining our ow prices, we need to transform our business (emphasis original). We can no longer use 20th century approaches to meet 21st century demands...we need transformational change...embracing the new, being bold, innovative and committed to taking action...that, together, will have transformational impact.”

The idea that sustainability requires collective action (corporations working directly to make internal business changes that will shape consumer sustainable practices) is further bolstered by IKEA’s CRP whose tone and content emphasizes

“...strong values; togetherness and enthusiasm; desire for renewal; cost-consciousness; accepting responsibility; humbleness and willpower; simplicity; leadership by example; daring to be different and striving to meet
reality. Our culture and values shape the way we do business and create a powerful desire to do the right thing. We always do our best to maintain the highest ethical standards and to be a good partner in society.”

The strategy of linking sustainability and civic virtue with collective and engaged initiatives demonstrates how IKEA’s CRP inspires and enables “millions of customers to live a sustainable life at home.” Etiquette seemingly matters at IKEA. So much so, that IKEA’s CRP cites the United Nations (UN) Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, “as our base...our belief that our actions should always have the best interests of the child in mind.”

My presentation thus far exemplifies how the CRP is grounded in CSR discourse (sustainability) and how it helps rhetorically depicts a positive organizational image for bolstering rhetorical profit, through decorum, reputation, and etiquette. CRP and CSR discourse not only deflects public criticism and scrutiny of corporations, but inevitably, facilitates a vision of sustainability and a manifestation of consciousness, that is subverted for purposes of generating profits.

**Implications and Conclusion**

Environmental ethicist Max Oelschlaeger refers to the sustainability buzzword as “primarily an apologetic for the continued wholesale exploitation of the earth and Third World peoples by multinational corporations and developed nations.” The CRP presented in this essay explores how it is possible for corporations to rhetorically direct human consciousness toward a commodified object/service while simultaneously presenting a corporate image that is respectful, reputable, and polite. Yet, the CRP described here does little to curtail the continued exploitation of the natural resources needed by a growing population absorbed with living a version of the “good life” promised by seemingly respectful, upright, and civil corporations. Left to the CRP, our consumptive behaviors are always shaped and reproduced by corporate dependence. Growing corporate dependence, arguably the main purpose of the CRP, is problematic for many reasons. The two implications most troubling, in my opinion, is how the CRP may be contributing to the end of environmentalism and the death of citizenship.

Because corporations facilitate “good life” manifestations (thereby catering to human and corporate desires) Tokar suggests that an environmental backlash is taking shape. Tokar points out that three related phenomena--the absorption of the mainstream environmental movement by the political status quo, the emergence of corporate environmentalism, and the proliferation of “ecological” products in the marketplace--have helped fuel the perception of a declining popular commitment to environmental protection. The authors conclude that the politics of environmentalism that led to clean water, less smog, and significant reductions of acid rain, are not keeping up with the present imperatives associated with global warming. The campaign and special interest led environmental politics of the 1970s, 1980, and 1990s needs to change, argue Shellenberger and Nordhaus, “to replace their doomsday discourse with an imagina-
tive, aspirational, and future-oriented one.” CRP rhetoric promising environmental “engagement” and civic duty creates a pseudo-environmental ethic that absconds citizens of their responsibilities and obligations because “the corporations are taking care of it.” As such, a “sustainable” future relies upon how we see through the CRP rhetoric. As Peterson states in her critique of sustainable development discourse, “It is quite possible for perfectly sustainable systems to perpetuate gross inequalities.”

As civic environmental initiatives fade and corporate dependency grows, individual citizens are seemingly content to let corporations dictate industry-friendly “democratic” principles. Citizenship is a political concept extended to individuals participating in the democratic process for societal betterment. For corporations, citizenship has a different connotation. The term “corporate citizenship,” for example, potentially highlights the decline of liberal citizenship, where the pivotal actor is typically the state and governmental institutions, bound by the protection of civil, social, and political rights. Like the charlatan rainmaker depicted in folklore that used charm, decorum, and reputation in promising rain for a price, the contemporary CRP “pitch” is not without consequences. Most significantly, CRP discourse facilitates further corporate dependence whereby human rights, obligations, environmental consciousness, and democratic practices are perceived as corporate and consumer-based initiatives rather than citizen activities.
End Notes

1 D’Alto, “The Rainmakers.” D’Alto traces the history of rainmaking in the United States and how the rainmaker became an icon in popular culture. Specifically, the article discusses the traditional practices of influencing the weather, especially the rainmaking techniques of Charles Mallory Hatfield. Often called “The Wizard of Weather,” Hatfield and his brother Paul were famous during the turn of the 20th century for erecting rain derricks: homemade square-sided wooden trestles that were the “secret” to producing rain in drought-stricken areas. In 1915, San Diego hired the Hatfield’s to end the southern California drought. Using their weather-making techniques, the city of San Diego received 38 inches of rain in a 14-day period causing mass flooding. Significantly, dramatist N. Richard Nash immortalized the story of Charles Hatfield and countless other would be “cloud kings” in his play, simply titled, “The Rainmaker.” Later, screen legend Burt Lancaster portrayed the title role in a film version. In 1999, film star Woody Harrelson reprised the role in a limited engagement on the Broadway stage. Accordingly, the “moral” of Nash’s play and film version is that “rainmaking” is not really about precipitation, but about belief—a morality play about the power, and the danger, of where we choose to place our trust.

2 D’Alto, “The Rainmakers,” p. 27. The folklore of rainmaking includes how “percuassions” sought to “tear the clouds” via explosions and how “vortexts” attempted to produce allegedly favorable flows.


4 John William Corrington. “The Rainmaker.” Legal Studies Forum 27 (2003): 541-542. The poem reads: There is no such thing as a job well done. The rule is, I must leave as soon as it’s begun. I live deserts. In my wake green explodes like the dream of a winter tree. A women in Tulsa, late one night, came to shake my thirst. We drank. Lips wet and shimmering, she said she had dreamed me long ago, a weather cock turning wind less above a crumbling barn. She asked why? I could not say whether she asked about the deluge or that wooden contrivance that serves me for what I do not need. Dressing quickly, feeling my vitru go, the motel pipes beginning to play, awaiting my lie: Because it isn’t there, I said, leaving her money I had got for bringing what was not. What they do not know is that the rain seeks me. It is my tempest that they see. I have been fragments of an ancient thing wedded together again, and love or the sight of green, the touch of mist would melt me like the Witch of the West upon whose breast I fed Last Spring When I was dead. And when I dream in a dry bed, rutted with dusty sweat, I see my brother on his way beneath our Father’s eyes, to set about the lethal thing he does so well: Perhaps an Iowa field in July, full of prayers and striving, ending as you would surmise in a flash flood.


7 Referred to as CSR for the remainder of the essay.


11 Referred to as CRP for the remainder of the essay.

12 I argue that the Corporate Citizen Report (CCR) is one of the primary means by which CSR is communicated. For information on the significance of CCRs, see: N.A. “Rolling Off More Presses: Reports on ‘Social Responsibility’—The 2000 Some Reports are Efforts to Provide More Disclosure and to Communicate with Important Stakeholders.” The Christian Science Monitor (December 4, 2006): 25.


20 B.L. War and Will A. Linkugel. “The Rhetorical Persona: Marcus Garvey as Black Moses.” Communication Monographs, 49 (1982): 50-62. Ware and Linkugel’s significance on persona is warranted based on their insistence that there is a difference between the actor’s personal ethos and ethos associated with a particular mask, or persona, but not on the basis that one (personal ethos) is more real or authentic than the other. Both person al ethos and persona are constructed rhetorically via language and action, yet persona is often characterized distinctly from personal ethos because it emerges within a culture complicated with rhetorical efforts by multiple actors (competitors), whereas personal ethos is more the result of individual decisions.

21 Ware and Linkugel, “The Rhetorical Persona,” 50.


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Interestingly, Cicero’s “principle” of “If you wish to persuade me, you must think my thoughts, feel my feelings, and speak my words” is used in teaching students how to write effective and persuasive business proposals. According to author Tom Sant, Cicero’s advice for writing “winning” corporate proposals is to consider three factors of the audience: its personality type, its level of expertise, and its role in the decision making process.


Hariman, *Political Style,* 96.

Hariman, *Political Style,* 4.


Meister and Japp. “Sustainable Development and the Global Economy.”


IKEA, “People & Planet Positive,” p. 3.


Responses to Shellenberger and Nordhaus’ essay and book received support and criticism. Of note, is Robert Brulle and J. Craig Jenkins’ critique “Spinning Our Way to Sustainability?” in which they state, “the fundamental problem with [Shellenberger and Nordhaus’] proposal is its lack of democracy” (85).
