

MoS Rapid Response Transcript – Rashad Robinson

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RASHAD ROBINSON: There's nothing you're going to do right this second to solve 400 years of oppression. But not doing anything means that you are just putting your hand on the continued scale of more of the same.

There's no greater power in dictating the terms of how communities are treated and how resources flow than corporate power in this country. Corporations can't simply talk about helping if they're not also willing to change some of the ways in which their practices and their policies and their go-to-market has impacted our community.

Money is not everything. How much money could I take from Wells Fargo that would make them stealing black people's homes okay? We've had decades of charitable solutions to structural problems rather than talking about inequality as unjust – and, as a result, focusing on the structures and the systems that have supercharged it.

The people that will win tomorrow are the folks who are not standing around worried about change, but looking about how do they lean into it — how do they align with it, how do they maximize it?

I'm an optimist. I have to be an optimist to wake up and do this work. And so I couldn't wake up every day if I didn't believe that something new was possible.

BOB SAFIAN: That's Rashad Robinson, president of Color Of Change.

The racial justice advocacy group has seen its membership more than triple this year, to some 7 million people.

Outrage about police violence has animated Americans of all backgrounds to demand action, and Rashad has responded by using his growing power base to push business leaders and all of us to think and act differently.

I'm Bob Safian, former editor of Fast Company, founder of The Flux Group and host of Masters of Scale: Rapid Response.

I wanted to talk with Rashad because no one has been more pointed -- or successful -- in attacking the ways that businesses reinforce racial inequity.

He's gone after both Hollywood kingpins and tech gods like Mark Zuckerberg.

He's also forged a partnership to help Airbnb, and convinced Ben & Jerry's, Unilever and others to deploy their capital differently.

Rashad is energized by this moment, even as he is wary of how some may exploit it.

There's no silver bullet for our troubles, he says, but there's plenty of opportunity for progress.

[THEME MUSIC]

SAFIAN: I'm Bob Safian and I'm here with Rashad Robinson, president of Color Of Change, a civil rights advocacy group, the largest online racial justice organization in the U.S. Color Of Change efforts include work on legislation like challenging stand your ground laws that were implicated in the death of Trayvon Martin; a program called Winning Justice that pushes prosecutors to address incarceration and bail issues; efforts on voting rights and the census; as well as attacks on insidious systemic racism.

Perhaps most distinctively, Rashad and Color Of Change have looked at businesses as levers of impact for racial justice. As he puts it, holding corporations accountable is part of the new work of civil rights. Rashad is coming to us from his home in Manhattan as I ask my questions from my home in Brooklyn. Rashad, thanks for joining us.

ROBINSON: Thanks for having me.

SAFIAN: So 2020 would have been a watershed year and distinctive for race relations in America if all we'd had to deal with was the coronavirus pandemic, which disproportionately has affected Black Americans and other minority communities. But then we had George Floyd's death. Do you remember where you were when you first heard about George Floyd's death and what you did?

ROBINSON: I was in the middle of some work around our corona response efforts and I ended up getting tagged in videos. It's almost like tagging is like 911 for people. And it's like, "What are you going to do about that Color of Change? Rashad Robinson, what are you going to do about that?" And so that's actually how I figured out about it. I get a lot of tagging of really horrific things that have happened.

SAFIAN: Did you know when you got tagged on that one that this one was different, was distinctive?

ROBINSON: It becomes apparent over time. Each situation for me, I still feel it. I still will see it. I'll try to process it. I will quickly work to check in with my team on: Have they seen it? What do other folks think? And so I'm sort of simultaneously going through my own emotional response with the moment as well as going through the strategic checklist that happens when you have to confirm the accuracy of something, when you have to find

out about the political context, checking in who do we know in the community that can give us any more color or background. All those things are important to translate what you may see to what the right response is – because my response is not just what I think about something, it is the start of what potentially is moving a piece of infrastructure to do something.

SAFIAN: How do you connect your practical reaction with your personal emotion?

ROBINSON: I think it's evolved. And sometimes I can't even tell if it's just me getting older. Yes, absolutely, I'm being hit with it.

I've also just lived in a world where you see and hear about horrible things. And you have to come to grips with your inability to do something about everything that matters to you and figuring out how do I do enough about the things that matter to me to make a difference?

SAFIAN: You've worked with entertainment icons like Oprah and Lady Gaga to push awareness, you're also pressing the entertainment industry for tangible changes. You got long running TV shows, “Cops” and “Live PD” off the air. How did you do that?

ROBINSON: We have this theory at Color Of Change of translating presence into power, translating visibility and awareness into actually changing the rules, and not mistaking visibility and awareness for actual change of written and unwritten rules. And so part of it in these moments is us, when we see a new level of energy, working to translate that energy at the levers that we can pull to make a difference.

And it wouldn't work if we just woke up yesterday with a theory of what needed to be changed. It's that we've been working on these for awhile. We first got “Cops” canceled from Fox back in 2013. A couple of months later it reappeared on syndication. It was one of those things that I was like, I'm coming back for “Cops” at some point. I just don't know when.

We have to have the right level of power, making choices about what I can do and what I can accomplish and how I can move the needle. As it remained on syndication, we saw other shows on like “Live PD” and “Border Crossings.” These shows were popping up.

People want to do something in this moment and you can talk about all the ways in which this type of injustice is normalized by what we see on TV. And holding entertainment companies and those in Hollywood that may stand on award stages and talk about justice and equality in the future, giving them very tangible things that they should be doing to actually ensure that what they are putting out in the world, is actually achieving the rhetoric or worth the rhetoric that they're saying on stages.

SAFIAN: You've said that Hollywood's and these shows have an agenda. And so that agenda is in some ways just to make money, but there's a social agenda that you see embedded in them that's not being acknowledged by the companies that are putting them out.

ROBINSON: In some ways what I said was an actual response to Dick Wolf, who is the legendary creator of "Law and Order" and "Chicago PD." And about a year ago, Dick Wolf [was] at the Television Critics Conference.

And a journalist asks Dick Wolf about his shows and about the impact that they were having on the world. And Dick Wolf said that his shows were apolitical, that he writes stories about race and crime and justice. He's just this apolitical guy putting out this content. And it was a very clear wake up call for me.

Shortly after that, we published a report with the Norman Lear School at USC on the 26 crime procedural shows where we really looked at these shows across a season and really looked at their representation of race and crime. And one thing we found: these shows are really diverse on air. The talent for the most part is very diverse – but the writers' rooms are not diverse at all. "Law and Order," the season we looked at, had an all white writers room, overwhelmingly men. "Chicago PD": all white writers room.

And so when we talk about an agenda, it is an agenda where they are presenting us to this fantasy world of racial diversity where racism doesn't exist: a justice system that catches the bad guys all the time and people are just constantly busy solving murders and crimes. We know that that's not what police do. The police, when they do break the rules, the end justifies the means.

The purpose was to push the industry to actually look at their own product, what they were putting out in the world, and look at the hiring decisions they were making and thinking about it all in terms of what they could do to change.

SAFIAN: Now, there are plenty of other industries that you have engaged with. You've been particularly aggressive with Silicon Valley companies. Facebook has been a recent high profile target. You've met with Mark Zuckerberg, as I have. Mark contends that the benefits of free expression and communication on his social networks outweigh the negatives. I tried to gracefully call those negatives design flaws, which Mark took issue with. You're nodding. This all I'm sure seems familiar to you.

ROBINSON: Yes.

SAFIAN: You've launched a campaign called "Stop Hate for Profit" and convinced a range of companies to pull their ad dollars from Facebook, from Ben and Jerry's to Verizon, Unilever, Starbucks most recently. Why was this necessary? And do you think it's going to make a difference?

ROBINSON: Well, it was necessary because we don't have many other levers. We need federal regulation of these platforms. And we knew that they're benefiting and leveraging rules that were written before they really even existed. And in so many ways we are outmatched in terms of our ability to hold these companies accountable. We have tried at the negotiation table, the civil rights table, the last five years of going back and forth of having very earnest conversations with Sheryl and deeply disappointing conversations with Mark. Actually the last meeting I had with Mark and Sheryl, it was maybe a little over a month ago now. And so we're in uprising time and I'm on a Zoom with them.

And I just say, "What are we doing here? What is the goal of this? You've come on to explain to me why Donald Trump's tweets posted on your site do not actually violate the rules. You have already made a decision that you're not going to do anything because Donald Trump represents a threat to other aspects of your business. And you're going to refer me back to a speech that you gave at Georgetown University, which is built on slave land, and you're going to lecture me, a Black activist about free expression and about how important free expression is? And how important it's been for Black people and how Black Lives Matter started on Facebook?"

I don't know what he was hoping. And so, what do I think about this campaign? I think that this has been a really important lever. I spoke at the last shareholders meeting, was one of the few outside speakers. I go there, I give my talk, and I know as I walk in that the shareholder resolution I was there to back – which was about diversity and civil rights expertise on their board – was already failing because Mark was against it.

And so this is why we're running these campaigns, because we've run out of other ways to actually impact change. And so if we can all link together in some sort of common cause for the moment, we might be able to deal some accountability to a platform that is far too big and has far too few rules.

SAFIAN: You mentioned diversity at the board level. I know Verizon, one of the first big names to pull their ads from Facebook, has several black members on its board. Did that help? Did this specific diversity on the board level at those companies make it more likely, or easier for them to hear you?

ROBINSON: We haven't done that analysis. And I think diversity is important in the right positions. I also am not one of those people that thinks that it singularly impacts and changes the world. My friend, Dorian Warren, at Center for Community Change, talks about not wanting a rainbow oligarchy. And I think that is an important way that I have to constantly remind us about how we think about diversity.

I think right now, we are in this moment where companies need different things that they can do. Facebook is a target that these companies have a problem with for other

reasons. And at the end of the day, it's a liability when Facebook hasn't been able to make a real set of structures in place to ensure that if you're a Verizon, your ad is not going to show up next to a site for white nationalists. And because Facebook can't fix that right now, or refuses to – refuses to adhere to third party oversight, refuses to alert people when their stuff has actually appeared next to white nationalists – because they haven't done that, I think it's making it a lot easier for companies to say that given the moment they don't want the risk.

SAFIAN: Another Silicon Valley company that you've worked with recently Airbnb, their platform has faced complaints that it disadvantages people of color. Recently Airbnb CEO, Brian Chesky announced Project Lighthouse, which is gathering data but not necessarily changing the platform right now. Can you explain what you're doing with Airbnb and what you're hoping is going to come out of it?

ROBINSON: The first real engagement I had with Airbnb folks were when board members of mine couldn't get an Airbnb when they were coming to a city. And they had booked one and then it got canceled. And then it reappeared on the thing and the person clearly just didn't want this black man who happened to be one of my board members.

And then stuff separate from us started bubbling up with a hashtag on social media and we ended up in meetings with Airbnb. We pushed Airbnb to do a civil rights audit, which is actually the first company we actually demanded do a civil rights audit.

And the audit ended with a number of successful things, including them changing a lot of rules around auto booking, around folks having to check specific boxes around anti-discrimination when they joined the platform, of putting a team of engineers on to root out bias on the platform.

And here's the thing: there's a lot of other problems that we still push on with Airbnb. But Silicon Valley companies putting engineers on diversity, racial justice, and other issues on their platform is when I know the company's actually focusing on doing something. Because they can hire a lot of lawyers to send memos around but when they actually put engineers on something in Silicon Valley, it means they're working to solve the problem.

And so the only reason that we recently got into this journey with Airbnb was really as an extension of the work we had already done. And now this new tool of data collection that has transparency rooted into the agreement means that we're trying to figure out more ways to determine bias on the platform, like what are the other ways in which people experience racism that may not seem on its face to be racist? If this platform can put in more tools that allows for folks to have a better experience and they're going to partner with us to agree to make it transparent. Hopefully we can have best practices at other places. And that's a road we're willing to travel.

The thing about Color Of Change is we don't actually take financial contributions from corporations. The partnership for us is really all about solving this problem. And they also know from us that we're not going to pull any punches. If you want to work with us, you'll probably get a lot of benefit and credit if it goes well out in the field. We also are people that understand mistakes happen and things don't always work out. But we're not going to pull punches and we're not going to come there just for a check.

SAFIAN: In the wake of George Floyd in recent weeks, a lot of different businesses have announced sometimes significant financial commitments around diversity and social justice, criminal justice reform. Do you think that's enough?

ROBINSON: Whenever someone does something like that very quickly in any moment, you're always like, "Well, thank you. That's important." It's always important someone takes a good first step, but this doesn't change the underlying causes. And we don't take corporate money, so I've woken up a number of mornings with these big announcements of hundreds of thousands of dollars a company is going to give us. And I'm like, "Well, that's not going to happen."

Some companies just went on with their credit cards and filled out the thing on the website. We've had to put those funds into a separate fund at our bank that will get distributed to grassroots organizations. Because here's the thing that I think really speaks to your question, is that we're not looking for charitable solutions to structural problems. It's not enough to send water bottles to Flint if all the corporations in Michigan decided they don't want to play their fair share. And as a result, they can't make infrastructure investments in Black communities, because the tax burden has created a situation where there's no money and there's no resources and cities have been put on austerity.

We can't do service days at inner city schools without actually looking at why some schools have the resources that other schools don't have. And there's no greater power in dictating how communities are treated and how resources flow than corporate power in this country. Corporations can't simply talk about helping if they're not also willing to change some of the ways in which their practices and their policies and their go-to-market has impacted our community.

[AD BREAK]

SAFIAN: You've said before and this was more, I think about government budgets, but that budgets are moral documents. If you're a corporate leader should you be looking at your budget and being worried about being held to a moral standard? Or is this an opportunity to be empowered, maybe, to do things that you hadn't done with your budgets before?

ROBINSON: The people that will win tomorrow are the folks who are not standing around worried about change, but looking about how do they lean into it and think about how do they align with it, how do they maximize it? There's going to be new things happening and new expectations and if you can get on board with that, you can be a real winner.

I think that we all have to start saying what we mean. And I think corporations, the most well-meaning folks, will say things that oftentimes move us in the wrong direction.

Corporations might say, "Black women are less likely to be hired into middle management." Instead of, "We are less likely to hire Black women, into the middle management."

And so here's what's important right here. On one hand, if you make it about Black women not getting hired into middle management, then you've made it about Black women. And now you have created pipeline programs and mentorship programs to help people do better inside of unequal and racist structures. You're not focusing on fixing your systems.

Now, if you focus on the system, then you can say, "What are we doing here that's preventing us from being able to tap into the potential of all the ways in which we know diversity allows you to tap into new markets, allows you to benefit in deep ways?"

We say Black communities are vulnerable communities, and vulnerability is a personal trait. It's not actually a trait of a community. And then resources go to fixing Black communities, fixing Black people, instead of actually fixing the structures that have targeted, exploited.

So I think that in terms of how we think about budgets, how we think about moral documents, it all is related to what is our expectation of people. When we look at various communities, do we see them as from a deficit perspective or do we see them from an asset perspective? We've had decades of charitable solutions to structural problems, telling stories that are unfortunate, like inequality is a car accident that just happened rather than talking about inequality as unjust – and, as a result, focusing on the structures and the systems that have supercharged it.

SAFIAN: The Black Lives Matter protests of late have focused on policing first, but Black Americans, as we've mentioned earlier, have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, dying in much higher proportions than white Americans. Why haven't there been big protests in the streets about that?

ROBINSON: The policing moment, right, is a moment of fight back emotionally. People dying from an illness is more of a moment of mourning. There's not an individual to hit

back at the same way and so viscerally, the response becomes different. And we have to think about that a lot just in terms of what levers we pull as an organization. What does the data tell us on the back end in terms of what the ladder of engagement for people's response will be? How many new people do we capture?

If I was talking to you five weeks ago, I would have said, "Color Of Change is somewhere around 1.7, 1.8 million Black folks and allies of every race who take action with us over the last eight months." Now we are over 7 million just in a couple of weeks – and it's unprecedented growth. And recognizing that that growth – we could look at everything from the George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery to the Amy Cooper video in Central Park.

And I think the fact that the new incoming is a little wider than previous sort of moments is a recognition of white folks may be asking themselves what they can do that's different, and feeling maybe that they saw Amy Cooper in their life in some way.

All of those things I think created the visceral sort of reaction. I mean, a video of someone being killed, it creates a different type of outrage.

The things that actually have animated people's participation has been racial justice. A lot of times folks think about racial justice as the thing you do to not get in trouble with the Black and Brown folks who might call you out. And this is more of like a political framing even on the left. People call me up: "If you get involved with Democracy Movement, we'll get better racial justice." And I'm like, "The reason why we don't have a true democracy is because of racial justice." And I'm like, "You guys know why we have climate problems and why polluting and why corporate power looks like this." It's like all related to a whole set of decisions related to racial injustice.

We're seeing in terms of a whole new generation of people out on the streets who will write about this decade later as their moment, who will be the ones doing seminars and documentaries on this moment, that racial justice was strategy. It is the force multiplier that can bring more and more people to the table – and, as a result, help us undo the norms that got us in this.

And if you actually care about something different happening at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, I believe it will be the driver towards expanding the base of people who show up in November and drive change.

SAFIAN: As an organizational leader during this year, there have been crisis after crisis after crisis, and many organizations are struggling. You've got members pouring in, you've got people sending you money you don't even want. What do you think is at stake for Color of Change right now?

ROBINSON: We've been getting these announcements of millions upon millions of dollars being announced from corporations. And in that moment, you could sit around and be like, "Do we really want to stay with this decision about not taking corporate money?" We could set up an endowment now and that could solve a lot of problems and then open up a whole new set of problems of us no longer being who we say. So part of it was really everyone looking at each other in leadership and looking at the board and reminding everyone like this is our decision. And yes, we will say no to this \$7 million dollars.

SAFIAN: But that means there are certain expansions you couldn't do. I mean there are other things you could be doing if you had that money.

ROBINSON: Sure, but money is not everything. You can do a lot in a certain type of size if you have the right strategy. If I take money from Wells Fargo, how much money could I take from Wells Fargo that would make them stealing black people's homes okay? Like what could I actually do? You have to make those decisions that you're not going to take this money and, as a result, you're going to lean in on the work to hold them accountable. Because my job here is to change rules. It's not to get more people coats.

Changing the rules, hopefully more people get coats, but the one-to-one around money to impact doesn't relate that if I just got more money in the door, then I could scale up and if I scale up, I can feed more people or I could clothe more kids. I am trying to change the rules of this country so that we are not treating certain communities in an austerity mindset, that we can have enough money to buy the things that we need, which I think is really an important way to think about what economic justice looks like.

That doesn't mean just having a whole lot of money ourselves. That is like leaning into this hyper capitalist framework of growth expansion: more money means more impact means better. That's not good for any of us.

SAFIAN: So you've chosen to be an activist. Many other Black leaders and other Black professionals successful in their fields find themselves under pressure to be a role model now more than ever. Do you have any advice for these folks and for others who turn to these folks at times like these leaning on them for guidance and counsel when maybe that wasn't what they signed in for?

ROBINSON: So on the folks who are just in their job every day, have been doing their job well and have become the visible senior level Black person inside of a company, I know you because a lot of you all reach out to me, and your boss now wants to have a discussion about race issues and they're asking you for your advice and you're sitting there and you're giving your advice. I want you to also think if your boss was asking you about their appendix, what would you say? Would you give the medical advice because maybe you had an appendix at some point that had to come out or would you think,

"Let's see if this boss will put some resource and energy behind bringing in a professional who understands this and put some energy behind it?"

And I really think that the best thing that Black folks who are thrust into these positions is to recognize where you stop and you start on this, and it's not your to be a spokesperson for everything. It is, though, your responsibility to use that moment and use that opportunity to get the foot in the door, to make sure that you expand the potential for change. If that means bringing someone else in, if that means forcing investments and a budget linethat actually then will mean something gets done, those are the things that I sort of push people to do. I think it's a tax. It's unfair and, at the same time, the only way we make it more fair is if it doesn't just become a burden for the Black employee but you use that moment to actually force the company to put the resources behind it the way they put resources behind things they care about.

SAFIAN: I hear things from a lot of white executives saying, "I want to do something right now. What can I do?" What is your reaction to those kinds of questions?

ROBINSON: I always push to say, "Let's see what you can do over the next couple of years." What can you do right now? There's nothing you're going to do right this second to solve 400 years of oppression. It's just not. But not doing anything means that you are just putting your hand on the continued scale of more of the same. And so take the moment to do something.

There is stuff to do, but just know that there's no silver bullet thing that you can do right away. And you'll probably gain a lot more praise and support if you lean in to long term work, rather than thinking you're going to get a quick, short term win.

SAFIAN: Are you hopeful about the future? Concerned about the future? Both?

ROBINSON: I'm an optimist. I have to be an optimist to wake up and do this work. I just wouldn't work – there's too many really challenging things crossed my desk on a regular basis. I am focused and determined. This is an inflection point and in a moment where we could go forward in so many really powerful, and amazing ways.

And I am really feeling quite inspired, and grateful to be alive, and healthy in this moment, to be able to be part of that work, to feel like I have something to offer. And that I am part of something that includes really brilliant, smart people and a really clear strategy that can help make that change and be part of it. And so, optimist – it's such a tricky word, but I feel like I couldn't wake up every day if I didn't believe that something new was possible.

SAFIAN: Is there one thing that you worry that you say, if we don't deal with this or this is keeping me up right now, if we don't deal with this specific problem, or we don't act on this specific opportunity, is there one thing that you'd say, this is the central thing right now?

ROBINSON: This is not saying this is the most important issue, although it's a very important issue, but as a lifetime organizer, I think we have to make good on dealing with policing and safety injustice. That's what's driving people into the streets, online, into social networks, into community with people during a pandemic where folks are dying from contact with each other. That's what's driving people's participation.

And so as an organizer, as a person who works to build power for poor people, and translate that into results is we have to do everything we can to make good on those demands, to translate those demands into change that impacts and makes people's lives better. And then expanding the aperture and the framework, so people can see that we are fighting for a lot of things, but I do think that winning on policing, and winning on the ways in which policing works has to be key.

SAFIAN: And that will open the door to additional things that are priorities also to change, but maybe less emotional for people to engage with right now.

ROBINSON: Good member service, good community service is to be able to address the things that people are coming to you with, and not thinking that you're smarter than their demands. It is about being in relationship and listening. And it becomes very hard to keep up people on a life cycle of political engagement when you've taken away or try to sort of neuter their passion, or their demands.

SAFIAN: Well, Rashad, thank you so much for your time, for your insights. I really appreciate you sharing everything with us. Thank you.

ROBINSON: Thanks. Thanks for having me.