

## Rapid Response Transcript – Zo Orchingwa

“From ‘delusion’ to criminal justice revolution”

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This is really limiting the reentry prospects for the incarcerated. There's been research that shows that more contact with family, more video calls has a very, very significant impact on recidivism reduction.

There are systemic issues that have caused this mass incarceration problem. 95% of folks in prison are going to come back to our society. So we have to ask ourselves: Do we want them to be folks that have opportunities and are able to contribute to our society?

With Jack Dorsey, we took a long shot. We wrote up a proposal and they got in touch with us. These tech luminaries, they understand the power of software. I just had to believe that it was possible.

**BOB SAFIAN:** That's Zo Orchingwa, founder of Ameelio, a software-based effort to improve criminal justice outcomes through new in-prison technology.

In just over two years since its launch, Ameelio is already in use across five state correctional systems, from Iowa to Colorado to Maine.

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 to Zo because incarceration is an undeniable anchor on our economy and our society. Zo is seeking to change that dynamic from the inside, through prisons themselves, which he argues haven't leveraged possibilities that new technology offers.

Zo's pragmatic approach, emphasizing the financial burdens on families and the positive potential of digital-education for those incarcerated has attracted backers from Jack Dorsey to our own Reid Hoffman.

His story includes intriguing lessons: about novel business models, the power of finding common interests, and believing in unlikely ideas.

## [THEME MUSIC]

**SAFIAN:** I'm Bob Safian, and I'm here with Zo Orchingwa, founder of Ameelio, a tech platform providing communication solutions to America's correctional system with the goal of transforming criminal justice outcomes. Zo, thanks for joining us.

**ORCHINGWA:** So excited to be here. Thanks so much for having me.

**SAFIAN:** So you have a master's in philosophy from Cambridge, a law degree from Yale, and an MBA from Yale. It's the kind of academic pedigree that could take you anywhere, but rather than go a traditional route, you chose to launch a start-up. So why did you start Ameelio?

**ORCHINGWA:** My parents are Nigerian immigrants, so I've gotten a lot of pressure from them and similar questions as to why not pursue a legal career or business career. But for me, growing up in Nigeria in a very, very poor part of the country, I've always been passionate about the issues of poverty and inequality. And upon coming to the states, unfortunately had a lot of friends who ended up incarcerated. So that set me off on this journey to try to better understand the U.S. criminal justice system and why it is that we incarcerate so many people and to try to devise solutions to solving it. So actually after my undergrad, I went to University of Cambridge to pursue a master's degree in criminology and where I was doing research on the causes of mass incarceration, the histories of it. And at the end, I realized that almost no focus is being paid to the actual carcel experience.

So once someone is incarcerated, what are the resources that are available to them? What are the technologies that they can use? And the more I learned, the more it became obvious that predatory companies were really exploiting the vulnerable families and the incarcerated, and really limiting their ability to successfully reintegrate into society. So my vision was: why don't we try to build a much more ethical platform that divorces profits from its motivation and is really focused on bringing the best technology to the incarcerated, to help them stay connected with those vital resources that they need?

**SAFIAN:** So a tech platform for prisons. It's not an intuitive opportunity though. I mean, departments of correction aren't hotbeds of innovation and risk taking.

**ORCHINGWA:** Yes.

**SAFIAN:** Did that give you pause at the beginning, or was that a draw?

**ORCHINGWA:** It was a draw. It was a draw. I think one of the limitations I'd see in innovation in tech today is that a lot of folks are trying to solve problems of leisure. How do we build solutions to make life a little bit more comfortable? For me, what drove me to found the tech company was that there are intractable social problems that we've been

dealing with for decades. And I thought it was very, very important for us to not forget the most vulnerable in our community. So recognizing that DOCs had very limited technology, I saw that as a tremendous opportunity to fundamentally transform the correctional space.

**SAFIAN:** Explain for our listeners what Ameelio does because it's a communications platform primarily.

**ORCHINGWA:** We're a communications and education platform and we started with communications. I think when we think about criminal justice reform, most of what we focus on is the policy. How do we lessen the sentences for the incarcerated? How do we address the out-sized power the prosecutors have? But not enough attention is being paid to what are the technologies and what are the resources available to folks while they're incarcerated? So right now there are two companies that dominate all the prison communications, meaning that if you want to stay connected with your loved one or if you're an attorney and you want to stay connected with your client, you're having to pay exorbitant fees. So it's up to \$15 for a 15 minute phone call, video calls are up to \$1 a minute, and e-messaging are up to \$1 for a single e-message.

And so this is not only driving one in three families with incarcerated loved ones into debt, but is really limiting the reentry prospects for the incarcerated. Because the folks you rely on post-release or your families are going to be your close networks, but if those bonds are severed, you almost have no chance of successfully reintegrating in society and rebuilding your lives. So what Ameelio does is we built a free communication platform, and also we'll be launching an education platform as well. And so in the core of it is, it's completely free for our end users. So the incarcerated never have to pay for the service, their loved ones never have to pay for the service. But we have different revenue streams, be it charging attorneys, kind of a de minimis fee to use a platform like a Zoom or Google Meets. And then also charging the Department of Corrections for access to the service and also access to our educational platform.

**SAFIAN:** So the Department of Corrections is subsidizing this in a way that it doesn't for the existing systems that are there?

**ORCHINGWA:** It's an extremely challenging industry to kind of break into because in the vast majority of the states, the DOCs are actually getting a kickback on the contracts with the vendors. So we often get asked, how are you going to possibly convince the Department of Corrections to not only take a chance on a start-up, but also to forgo the large amounts of money that they're making? So it's really a regressive tax on the most low income folks in our communities. But what we've been able to do is to be able to show DOCs the long-term benefits of working with Ameelio, the long-term labor savings for their staff, and an overall recidivate reduction in cost savings for the entire state. So the very first state that we actually partnered with was the Iowa Department of Corrections, and they're a kickback state.

They actually earned revenue from the phone contracts and the e-messaging contracts that they have, but they have a very visionary executive director. And we went to her, Beth Skinner, and we presented our idea. And we talked to her about the long-term benefits. We see that more contact with family reduces recidivism. It makes prison safer because it brings hope into these facilities. And it also saves their correctional staff a ton of time. We also provide scheduling. So right before we actually entered that prison system, in order for you to visit someone in Iowa prisons, you had to download a PDF. You had to fill out the information, send it to a central location, you had to call in to the DOC staff and request a visit. Thousands of thousands of calls every day became very, very unmanageable. And so what we were able to do is build an app for families that they can use to not only send e-messages and make video calls, but also schedule in-person visits, which saves the DOC an abundance of time.

**SAFIAN:** As you describe it sounds simple and almost obvious. Why shouldn't it be this way, if this is what I can do in my workplace? But Departments of Corrections just haven't modernized in that way at all.

**ORCHINGWA:** It's not only their fault though. We often get asked, why doesn't Zoom or Google Meets or these other very, very large communication platforms provide this technology? It's that their services are built for the free world, right? But for the correctional space, they need an abundance of security specifications in order to be able to enable technology to come in.

So the way our system works is that there's actually three clients. There's a Department of Corrections that needs a managing dashboard. They need the ability to monitor calls, to access call recordings, and to verify users. And then you have the incarcerated who need to be able to access the system and then family members on the outside as well. The challenge is that there's not a lot of great technology available to DOCs. And so they've been stuck with these incumbent companies, and they were actually very excited that a new player was entering the space.

**SAFIAN:** And so the communications that happen on the platform with families, the DOCs are monitoring that. Whereas the other part of your business, you mentioned communication with attorneys, I imagine that can't be monitored.

**ORCHINGWA:** Exactly.

**SAFIAN:** That's a tricky two tracks to keep open, right?

**ORCHINGWA:** That also presented us a great opportunity to enter this space because our competitors don't have attorney-client privilege communications. They just kind of force everyone to use their standard system. So there's been an abundance of lawsuits. Attorney calls have been recorded and leaked. So you have a lot of attorneys that really

are fearful of using these technologies, which makes it extremely hard for them to do their work. That was what was really exciting to attorneys in that we were able to build a system for them that was not recorded, that we didn't have access to, that was completely safe and secure. Where we see challenges, I think those are great places for opportunity as well, and so this is one of the reasons we were able to kind of break into certain systems.

**SAFIAN:** Is this software, is it all baked into hardware also? I still have, probably, an old fashioned vision of lines of people waiting for payphones.

**ORCHINGWA:** One of our competitive advantages is that we're the only player in this space that's hardware agnostic. We don't mandate that DOC's have to use any particular hardware. That flexibility enables us to be able to scale relatively quickly. In Iowa we're actually leveraging Google Chromebooks. Iowa had Chromebooks across their facilities that they weren't using, and so what we were able to do is leverage that, lock it down with an MDM system, and enable our web app. So the incarcerated are able to just log-in, they enter their pin code. And family on the outside through a mobile app, they're able to schedule these calls as well. But we do also offer DOC's the ability to purchase hardware from us. We've customized our own proprietary casing that we put off the shelf. Say it's on tablets or Apple iPads that DOC's can directly purchase from us. Some DOC's do like bundled services. It's kind of the way the incumbents have been able to really dominate this space because they can say, "Hey, you buy our tablets and it has everything in them."

But our flexibility is a competitive advantage because we can do both. We can work off existing systems, but we can also deliver tablets to the facilities.

**SAFIAN:** You mentioned you're working with Iowa, you're working with the Colorado Department of Corrections, with the Maine Department of Corrections.

It's a disparate group, not necessarily the states with the largest incarcerated populations. Is that by design? Is that by opportunity?

**ORCHINGWA:** Yeah, it's both, both. We're a lean start-up, and so we knew we needed to start small. We needed to start with systems that we can manage, but we've gotten to the stage now where we can serve the entire correctional population. For us, it's really just about opportunity. So, Colorado being the second DOC that we've partnered with has over 20,000 incarcerated folks. Iowa has over 9,000, and Maine, it's much smaller at 2,000. But we've recently signed a contract with the Mississippi DOC. So, we're getting bigger, and we're scaling, but yes. It's a disparate group. Iowa is a red state. Maine is kind of purple-ish and is much smaller, and Colorado very similar, and then Mississippi obviously. It was kind of shocking to us. They were very, very eager actually to work with us. I think a lot of the assumptions we had going in, a lot of folks from the outside are very, rightfully so, are very skeptical of the Department of Corrections.

We've all watched the documentaries. We all see the articles and the prisons look like very, very terrible places, but I think what we also forget is that a lot of people in this space went into it as public servants, are not very well paid. It's a challenging job, and so what we've been able to do at Ameelio is find those champions within the system that have really wanted to revolutionize this space and are able to work and partner with them.

**SAFIAN:** As I'm reflecting on the story you're telling about why you got into this in the first place, your goal is not necessarily to increase the scale of incarceration.

**ORCHINGWA:** Exactly.

**SAFIAN:** And yet you have to be very respectful of those whose job it is to manage that system because those are your partners.

**ORCHINGWA:** You probably hear this from a lot of nonprofits that say they don't want to exist. They want to work themselves out of existence in the very near future. But for us, that's really at the core of our work. If we are successful, we are going to shrink the sizes of prison systems and ultimately will put ourselves out of business. In order to be transparent we've actually partnered with the University of Chicago to be able to evaluate our impact.

All of our work will be available in published articles, and so basically, our work with the University of Chicago team is to study four key questions. What's Ameelio's impact on cost savings in the finances of families? It's over 27 million Americans with incarcerated family members right now. It's close to 10% of the entire population. We're looking at: what are we doing to fundamentally reduce that financial burden that they're facing to help folks to get out of the debt that they're in?

The second question is: what is our impact on prison infraction? There's been research that shows that more contact with family, more support, reduces the violence and is very intuitive. Then recidivism obviously being the north star. Are we able to prevent people from getting back to prison? There's some work that the Minnesota DOC's already done that shows that video calls have a very, very significant impact on recidivism reduction.

And then mental wellness, there's a crisis of mental illness in prison. Over 40% of folks who are incarcerated are suffering from some sort of mental illness that is also exacerbated by just how challenging the prison system is. So, being able to leverage our platform to enable folks to get access to mental health clinicians and other services is really part of the core of our work.

**SAFIAN:** These studies, it's early for quantitative results at this point.

**ORCHINGWA:** Yes.

**SAFIAN:** Is there any anecdotal information you have or you get about what the impact of Ameelio's been so far?

**ORCHINGWA:** The very first product we actually launched was a mobile app that allowed users to send letters, postcards, games, that we then convert into a physical form and mail into the facilities. That product has close to 500,000 users now. The reviews are tear jerking. A lot of families can't even afford 50 cent stamps. You'll see in the reviews, folks talking about spending all their money on health services and not having enough to be able to send letters. Just seeing that alone was added momentum and added fuel for us to expand beyond just that letter service to get into real-time video communication. We have folks who've used our system that are actually released now and are serving as Ameelio ambassadors. The stories we get are incredible, but this is really only the beginning. We see this technology as breaking that digital divide that exists between prisons and the outside world.

**[AD BREAK]**

**SAFIAN:** Before the break we heard Zo Orchingwa at Ameelio talk about how he's trying to improve criminal justice outcomes through new technology.

Now he talks about how he successfully raised funding from the likes of Jack Dorsey and our own Reid Hoffman.

He also talks about how Ameelio generates revenue in surprising ways, and why that differentiates his effort from many other non-profits.

Plus he shares insights about why the blame game can distract us from effective problem-solving, and how pragmatic approaches can scale societal improvement.

You've got some extraordinary financial supporters at Ameelio, Jack Dorsey, Eric Schmidt, our own Reid Hoffman, among others. How did you get connected to these, well, billionaires?

**ORCHINGWA:** My co-founder Gabe likes to say that I'm very delusional and that I'm able to leverage that delusion.

For me, being a first time founder, not really having much social capital, as I mentioned, both my parents are Nigerian immigrants. We moved back to the states when I was nine years old, living in a one bedroom apartment in Hartford. And I've always had the vision that my parents instilled in me that if I worked hard enough, if I was humble and was committed to my goals, that it'd be possible to make really big things happen. So really, how I got in touch with most of those people was cold-emailing. I actually cold-emailed

Reid Hoffman. And as I was told, he never responds to cold emails. So probably not a good thing for anyone else to do, but luckily, he had been passionate.

He's obviously a great philanthropist, has been supporting voting organizations and education groups, but was really new to the criminal justice space, but did his due diligence, and learned more about the space and about the work that we were doing. And I was able to connect with him and his team and really kind of pitch them on the work that we're doing. With Jack Dorsey, it was very similar. I got connected through a friend to Deray McKesson. And he flagged for me that Jack had just started the Start Small Initiative. And so we took a long shot. We wrote up a proposal and sent it to them, and it took a while, but they finally got in touch with us, and we were able to pitch to them. It's really been a whirlwind. These tech luminaries, they understand the power of software. They understand that once that initial investment is made, the scaling opportunity is incredible. And we're so appreciative of them. And we've been able to serve, now, close to a million people.

**SAFIAN:** What's it like to pitch these luminaries? Are you doing it by Zoom? Are you doing it in person? How do you prepare?

**ORCHINGWA:** Yeah, it's frightening. I'm not going to lie. We launched at the height of COVID. So our very first product was actually launched in March of 2020. So pretty much all the fundraising we've done has been virtual. And I actually recently met Reid Hoffman in person and was very, very nervous. I was reading every article I could on Reid. I was trying to figure out: how do I impress this guy that's built one of the biggest technology companies and now is a VC that's funding incredible companies? And so I think a lot of it is just embracing your delusions. To think that the Jack Dorsey or the Eric Schmidt's of the world have the time to even listen to, kind of, this small upstart company, I just had to believe that it was possible.

**SAFIAN:** So Amilio is a non-profit. But it has a business model, a revenue plan that isn't geared to ultimately being reliant on fundraising and donations.

**ORCHINGWA:** Yes. And we think it's a model that other non-profits should follow. So for us, it was important to divorce profit from our motives, because we realized at the end of the day, the most profitable group to charge in this space is families and the incarcerated. So we didn't actually want to raise venture funding for this because ultimately we felt that it wasn't kind of an ethical business model that would allow us to really generate the profits that VCs would want. But we knew that we didn't want to rely on philanthropy. It's very hard to fundraise, especially as a tech non-profit. I think your typical foundations aren't used to software solutions, right?

The huge support that we've received from folks like Jack and Reid has allowed us to build the technology and to build out the team that we need to make this thing happen. But long term, as I mentioned, charging attorneys, or DOCs directly, or educational

organizations would allow us long term to be able to generate enough revenue to be sustainable. But our goal at the end of the day is not to be extremely profitable. We want to charge just enough to keep the lights on, but to accelerate growth as fast as possible. So we don't want to go to a DOC and say, "Hey, in order to use our service, you have to pay us tons of money," because that's going to slow down the adoption of the technology.

So we want to charge as little as needed in order to enable us to scale. But yes, from day one, actually we've been generating revenue. So our written communication app, it's free for families. We allow folks to send three free letters, postcards, games, and other content every week for free. But folks who do have the means can purchase additional content in our premium store. And we leverage that money to subsidize it for the rest of the users.

The very first state that we launched in, Iowa, we were break even from day one. We were leveraging their existing hardware, their cloud storage. So all we have to do is deliver our communication solution. So being flexible like that, being creative is really what we're going to rely on to get to the point where we don't have to beg Reid and Jack and the rest for donations.

**SAFIAN:** You shouldn't have to be scrounging for the next grant, which is what a lot of non-profits, whatever their social impact goals are, are spending a lot of their time and energy on.

**ORCHINGWA:** Definitely. More than 50% of my time right now is spent fundraising. It limits our ability to be as impactful as we can.

**SAFIAN:** You've mentioned education a couple times. Can you explain what the education thread of this is?

**ORCHINGWA:** Prisons are predominantly in remote areas, which means it's very, very hard for educators and colleges to be able to reach them. So we all know about really successful programs like the Bard Prison Initiative, the Hudson Link, or the Wesleyans Program. But those are very, very small programs. They're geographically limited. And with the reinstatement of second chance Pell, you now have 500,000 incarcerated folks who now have access to federal funding to be able to support their education. But there's not enough supply of educational opportunities. And so our vision was: how do we leverage technology to be able to scale virtual education or reach as many incarcerated people as possible? There is an asynchronous component.

So being able to leverage existing educational content through partnerships with say companies like Masterclass or LinkedIn Learning, allow folks to be able to watch TED Talks or Khan Academy. We call that Ameelio Gutenberg, just a free resource library that allows folks to guide their own education.

The second component is the actual real-time post-secondary education to engage with the incarcerated directly in their cells or in their classrooms.

The challenge there is that you can't use Zoom because DOCs don't want students to be able to interact with each other. There are a lot of security restrictions and fears. So we have to build a system that enables the professor to be able to engage with all the students at once, but the students can only engage directly with the professors or the TAs.

We've been able to sign a bunch of colleges. MIT has a prison education program that's going to be leveraging our system. All the colleges in Iowa are planning to leverage our system.

By enabling the incarcerated to have access to these opportunities, they can actually shorten the length of their sentences.

**SAFIAN:** These don't necessarily need to be degree-oriented programs. There are credentials and certifications of all different kinds that are part of this mix.

**ORCHINGWA:** Exactly. For a lot of our users, they want to get certifications that are going to help them be able to get jobs post release. They're thinking about, "How do I support my family? How do I rebuild my life right away?" So we want to have an eclectic array of options for students.

When you log onto the platform, you're actually given an option. Do you want a BA? Do you want an AA? Or do you want vocational job training opportunities? So students are actually able to pick and guide their own path.

Nationally, we spend over \$35,000 a year to incarcerate someone. Over \$80 billion a year spent on just corrections alone, not even talking about courts and the impact on families. It's an extremely expensive problem.

We believe that by realigning and giving DOCs options to be able to help folks to get educated on the inside, it's not only the right and moral thing to do, but it's also the pragmatic thing. It's going to save states a ton of money in the long run.

**SAFIAN:** You've had some success. But in some ways, it's also still early days. What's at stake for Ameelio right now?

**ORCHINGWA:** I think what's at stake for us right now is: how do we scale beyond these five states that we've been able to partner with? I think that often we get asked, "What is the plan to get to the 2.2 million?" There's over 4,000 county jails across the country with their own unique needs.

What we're really trying to do is partner with strategic organizations, thinking about: in order for us to scale effectively, focusing purely on software is the way to go. So thinking about: how do we work with companies like Google or Microsoft that not only have great software, but cloud storage, hardware, etc.? We're now in talks with a handful of these companies.

We often hear, "Why the incarcerated? These are folks who have committed crimes. These are folks who may have done terrible things. Why should we care?" I meet folks where they're at.

I think that my friends who were incarcerated, we had very, very similar experiences on the outside. We went to the same schools. We played in the same AAU teams and played basketball together, but our home lives were drastically different. My parents were college educated. From day one, I was going to college. But my friends were from single parent households. They had siblings and parents who had been incarcerated. Their home lives were so different.

I think we often overlook the hidden causes of incarceration, and we often blame folks for the worst thing that they've done. But when we look at the data, over 50% of folks who were incarcerated had no income up to eight years prior to their incarceration. A year prior, 80% had no income. Poverty is a tremendous driver.

Certainly, we should hold folks accountable for their actions, but we should also understand that there are systemic issues that have caused this mass incarceration problem. If we want to solve it, we need to be pragmatic. Give folks those resources and those critical opportunities that they didn't have that led to their incarceration in the first place? 95% of folks in prison are going to come back to our society. So we have to ask ourselves what kind of citizen do we want them to be? Do we want them to be folks that have opportunities and are able to rebuild and contribute to our society? Or do we want them to be folks that have no opportunities and are more likely to go back into prison?

**SAFIAN:** Well, Zo, this has been great. Thank you. Thanks for your passion and your enthusiasm for this and your effort, and thanks for talking with us.

**ORCHINGWA:** Of course. No, thank you for the opportunity.