Rapid Response Transcript – Rashad Robinson

“Holding business accountable from Meta to McDonald’s”

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RASHAD ROBINSON: When I think about all of the things that actually motivate people, racial justice is one of the strongest force-multipliers we have in our society to move people to action.

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There is no greater protagonist in the story of American democracy than Black people. When Black people win, we make society better for everyone. And the goal is to make our country and our society better for all of us.

BOB SAFIAN: That's Rashad Robinson, president of Color of Change, a civil rights advocacy group and the largest online racial justice organization in the U.S.

Rashad appeared on this show after George Floyd was murdered in 2020, pointing out the role that business could play in addressing racial injustice.

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 Rashad again because, two years later, commitments from corporate America have often fallen short of expectations and promises.

Color of Change grew from 2 million members to 7 million in a matter of weeks in 2020, and Rashad has marshaled that community to put pressure on CEOs and boards, particularly at tech companies and especially at Facebook.

He's successfully pressed for racial equity audits too, via shareholder votes, from McDonald’s to Apple.

He’s also expanded Color of Change’s efforts to include women’s rights and abortion access and has worked directly with Barack Obama on addressing disinformation.

Rashad says that size alone isn’t what matters — that the scale of your power flows from the passion of your team and how disciplined you are in choosing your priorities.
His lessons about what Black people mean to and for America are compelling, as are his strategies for making positive change, from Silicon Valley to Hollywood to Washington DC.

A nonprofit shouldn't be expected to hold industry leaders and billionaires accountable, Rashad says, but if others aren’t going to step up then Color of Change will. He’s committed to making the organization what he calls “a force multiplier” in societal efforts to build a better tomorrow.

[THEME MUSIC]

SAFIAN: I'm Bob Safian. I'm here with Rashad Robinson, president of Color of Change, a civil rights advocacy group and the largest online racial justice organization in the U.S. Rashad, thanks for joining us.

ROBINSON: It's great to be with you again.

SAFIAN: You were on this show two years ago when the pandemic was still very much in crisis mode, soon after George Floyd was murdered, and we talked a fair amount about the role that business could play in promoting equity. Since then, there's been a lot of discussion about increased commitments from business leaders, about their responsibility in shaping society and leadership. But there's controversy about talk versus action, and many businesses struggle with where they should land. You're on the front lines of this effort striving to make change. How much has changed from two years ago? Have we really made progress? What's your perspective about sitting where we are right now?

ROBINSON: Well, I think it's a mixed bag. We absolutely have made progress. Did we meet the commitments in the broad statements that were made by CEOs and boards of directors? Absolutely not, but I never thought we would. A lot of reactions and hopes and dreams from companies that had a whole lot of work to do and probably didn't even understand the level of work and structural change that was going to be needed in order for them to match reality with their words.

We launched something called Beyond the Statement. Beyond the Statement really focused on a set of demands that were connected to those statements about Black Lives Matter. Most recently, I presented in May at the McDonald's shareholders meeting. We won with 54% of the vote, a racial equity audit. Now racial equity audits are an important step at transparency that lay out where the company is at and then give us the ability on the outside to be able to hold the company to standards and next steps that are actually meaningful beyond words.

Of course, we’re seeing a backslide of commitments. We’re seeing companies try to wiggle out of things that they said and things that they committed to, but that's all part of any work towards progress.
SAFIAN: The goals that were set out in some of those statements, it's just harder for organizations to reach them so it's taking them longer, or are they rethinking like, "I'm not sure that's really where I want to go?"

ROBINSON: They've made these statements, and they realize, "Oh, wow. We have to change a lot of things that we do in order to actually meet this new standard.

Bob, a lot of people want to believe that racial inequity is unfortunate, almost like a car accident. It just happens. If we do a couple of things differently, we can avoid the car accident, but racial injustice, racial inequality is not unfortunate like a car accident. It is manufactured. It is manufactured through a set of choices.

When we're actually trying to deal with harm that exists in the world, we have to recognize that we're not looking for charitable solutions to problems that are structural. We're asking for structural change.

If banks start off the conversation by saying, "Oh, wow. Black people are less likely to get a loan from our bank," rather than saying, "Our bank is less likely to give loans to Black people." Now on one hand, they're like, "Oh, we should do some financial literacy programs that don't actually require the bank to change anything about their day-to-day actions," the ways in which they are assessing risks, evaluating communities. They're just saying, "Oh, we want to fix these people."

We see that not just in banks, but we see that across the board. Whether it's the bank, whether it's a social media company, whether it's any of these institutions that made these bold statements about changing and being committed to racial equity, if they ask themselves the question in the active voice, now they have to force themselves to change their practices.

Our work is to build a stronger, broader, multiracial coalition of people who actually will demand better from these companies and demand these companies actually meet the standards they've committed to.

SAFIAN: Because systemic change of the kind you're talking about is uncomfortable for these organizations. It's uncomfortable. It may be expensive. They don't really want to have to do it at a certain level, even if maybe intellectually they think they do. When it comes to the practicality, it gets too hard.

ROBINSON: They want the results at the end, but they don't want to have to change the practices to get there. This is human nature. This is how we operate. When you're dealing with something so entrenched in America's democracy and America's economy as racial inequity, of course the shortcuts are going to be very much part of how people want to get from point A to point B without actually having to change anything along the way.
SAFIAN: I want to ask you about Facebook. When we talked two years ago, you targeted Facebook, getting advertisers to pull back in what you called Stop Hate for Profit.

You recently came out with a new petition, working with the Tech Transparency Project, again targeting Facebook about hate-based organizations that are still getting support on the platform. Can you explain what's happening with Facebook, maybe why you are focused on them or maybe that they're not responding to you in quite the way you might hope they would?

ROBINSON: Facebook is the largest communications platform the world has ever seen. It has nearly 3 billion users. That's more followers than Christianity. We are focusing on Facebook because of its outsized role and impact in our lives. Nearly 70% of the messenger market between Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook is controlled by Meta.

Self-regulated companies, which Facebook and the other tech companies are, are unregulated companies. They get to make their own rules and determine whether or not they meet those rules. When we launched the Stop Hate for Profit campaign, it was because I had been in multiple meetings with Mark Zuckerberg and Sheryl Sandberg where we had gotten commitments. We walked out the door. We had talked to the press about the commitments. They had talked to the press about the commitments around dealing with various issues on the platforms. Then Donald Trump, or someone else powerful, would violate those rules, and nothing would happen. That is a result of not really, in the end, having rules because these companies can do whatever they want.

You go into the supermarket, and your food is safe. That's not because the companies have on their own set these standards. Many of them fight these standards when new standards are introduced. The technology that can bring us into the future is dragging us into the past, violating civil rights law, creating all sorts of challenges. The great work of the Tech Transparency Project was, once again, things that Facebook said they had eliminated that you realized they hadn't eliminated.

Looking up white nationalist organizations like the KKK, and then getting served ads for Black churches. That is life and death. All sorts of groups and organizations that should no longer have access on Facebook based on their own rules are still on the platform. They're not going to put the dollars behind it because there's not the consequence on the other end for violating rules and regulations.

We have to hold Facebook accountable. We have to create a new context for how these companies operate, whether it is breaking them up, whether it is new rules around how they get to operate in the public space in terms of the immunity they have over the content on their platforms. There's freedom of speech, but not freedom for amplification, not freedom for leveraging and moving content through ads.
We can separate those things, still have platforms that sort of allow us to share information and have conversations, even if it's conversations you and I might not agree with, and at the same time hold these platforms accountable for the harm they're doing out in the world.

SAFIAN: When Facebook says, as they do, that they have more people working on topics like this internally than work for the FBI, that it's not a question of their intent. It's just the challenge is so complicated, you don't buy that.

ROBINSON: They do not tell the truth time and time again. I have walked out of Facebook multiple times with one story only to hear a different story in the press.

My job I feel over the last couple of years has been to hold the line between real solutions and fake solutions. Facebook wants us all to believe that the problems with information disorder are related to the practices of everyday people, not the algorithms, but when we get information from Facebook whistleblowers, we learn a couple of things.

We learn how Facebook has changed its algorithm over the years, so you actually see less of your friends and family and more of the type of conversations that incite anger and passion and vitriol because they want to keep you on the platform longer.

Now, that is a business choice. They have created by design information flows on their platform. If there was actual accountability, if there were rules and fines at the scale that would be meaningful, I bet you Facebook would fix the problem because they would be incentivized to fix the problem.

SAFIAN: You've worked with a bunch of other big tech firms, challenged some. You had a foray with Apple earlier this year advocating for a third party civil rights audit. How is Apple to work with compared to Facebook?

ROBINSON: All of these companies have been fighting audits. I would actually say Facebook went into the civil rights audit with way more willingness than Apple and Google and some of these other companies which have fought it.

When I think about Apple, and I think about all of these companies, it is, for me, a deep recognition of the place we're in because of the failure of our elected leaders. None of us should have to go to billionaires and beg for them to follow civil rights law, demanding that they are accountable to the harms that they create to communities. We have a failure in the regulatory environment.

So, I would love to be in a place years from now where it's looking at how these companies actually meet the standards.
My non-profit, my relatively small nonprofit, is giving so much free advising, free advice, free counsel to these companies about how to fix problems. It should be insufficient for anyone who's listening right now to think that it's the non-profit organizations that are working to hold these companies accountable. Mark Zuckerberg goes to Capitol Hill, and nothing is done. That is totally insufficient. All of us need to be demanding more from our elected officials.

SAFIAN: You had an outreach from Barack Obama about a year ago. Can you tell us that story?

ROBINSON: President Obama reached out to talk a little bit about misinformation and disinformation. All of the stories and lies that have been told about him and his heritage and his family and his policies and his intent, and he asked, would I be interested in helping to share my thoughts, advice as he was thinking about wrestling with these issues and where he could make an impact?

It led to the speech he gave at Stanford, which I was able to help some with, as well as ongoing engagement with him and his team at the Obama Foundation.

We feel like David in the David and Goliath struggle against these companies. But the former most powerful person in the world, probably the most famous Black person in the world, next to Beyonce, came out and really talked about these issues and helped people understand the harm that is being caused.

There's simply no way that a multiracial democracy of people who don't have ancestral connections can live and thrive and work together, if we can't have an environment where fact and truth has a chance at being heard.

[AD BREAK]

SAFIAN: Before the break we heard Rashad Robinson, the President of Color of Change, talk about his efforts to push back on companies from McDonald's to Facebook, on issues of racial equity and disinformation.

Now he talks about how Color of Change is pushing the entertainment industry, and how “the way power works in Hollywood,” as he puts it, creates resistance.

He also shares lessons, about being practical with your priorities, but always in service of a clear north star. Business has to use the same kind of innovation it applies to money-making efforts to addressing cultural issues, he argues. And in the process, those initiatives will become a strategic motivator for all kinds of progress.

Building a movement like you're trying to do is hard, keeping people's attention over time when there are so many changes going on in the world. You mentioned last time that...
Change’s membership was at around 2 million and then jumped to 7 million in a matter of weeks after George Floyd. Has that number kept growing? How do you operate differently at this new level of scale? Are you looking to get to the next level of scale?

**ROBINSON:** I wouldn't say that we've grown much more since then, but we've worked just to go deeper with people.

And so, growing the ways in which people engage, not just single actions, but in our offline work now that we’re back in-person places. I think that there is size and there’s power, but as someone who’s 5'3, I like to believe that you can be very powerful, and you don't always have to be big.

Sustaining energy is hard. And there's going to be constant ebbs and flows to what people are able to do, and the life cycle of both people's commitments and campaigns. One of the secret sauces and not so secret sauces at Color of Change is that we work to win. We can win real change, win things that are meaningful, win campaigns that move us forward.

**SAFIAN:** We talked a little bit last time about how you're consistently modulating where Color of Change goes and the issues that it works around based on what your community's going to respond to and where you can get action. I mean, there's a lot more that you guys are doing now around women's rights and abortion access than you were doing two years ago. And now I guess maybe policing is a little less of a hot issue. Is that the way you think about the strategy of it?

**ROBINSON:** We are trying to be valuable to our members, to the issues that are impacting them and are front and center. And so we absolutely will be in District Attorney races through our political action committee this election cycle. We absolutely have been on Capitol Hill fighting this legislation that's going to give more money to police without any accountability federally, and been focused on working very closely with members of the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Progressive Caucus on strategies to be able to fight back on legislation when they were trying to combine the gun legislation with the policing legislation and try to move it together, and we pushed and got it separated.

When the Dobbs decision came down around abortion access, we had already been doing work with what was happening on platforms around vigilantes using the platforms to target women who had made reproductive choices, whether it was Reddit, Facebook getting things pulled down, forcing the companies to update their terms of services. We work to hold Facebook accountable when they share the DMs of a 17-year-old, which then leads to prosecution of her and her mother.

We are trying to shape an environment and take on campaigns and try to be as strategic as possible about where we have power and where we don't have power. You're not
going to see a campaign from Color of Change that says, "Tell Mitch McConnell to stand up for Affirmative Action." Now, I would love it if Mitch McConnell would stand up for Affirmative Action, but that's fantasy, and I try to live in reality.

We have to constantly think about what does it mean to not just have presence, which is visibility and awareness, retweets, shout-outs from the stage, emails that people click and sign and share because they're outraged. People take action with us. And we're asking people to take the types of strategic action where their participation will potentially add up to something real.

SAFIAN: There's a practicality, a discipline and a practicality to the way you're doing this. Things that are working, you do more of. You use the resources, the assets that you have to get more out of what's working, and maybe try not to get distracted by the hopes or the pie in the sky things that maybe aren't close enough at hand for you to be able to deliver on.

ROBINSON: It's important that you, you're helping people see a north star, a world that we hope to live in. A more human, less hostile world. There is no greater protagonist in the story of American democracy than Black people.

And the wins along the way for American democracy that Black people have led and that Black people have fought for in multiracial coalitions, asking people of all races to be their better selves along the way for those fights, that has made this country better. What is the story of education if it's not a story of people who would've been killed for learning how to read, but fought? And despite all of that, fought to be educated, when they were excluded, built their own education institutions. Those are the stories that I want to tell because when we tell stories that center the community as the protagonist, what we can believe is possible can be much bigger, much grander, much better.

We fundamentally believe that when Black people win, we make society better for everyone. And the goal is to make our country and our society better for all of us.

SAFIAN: In the realm of storytelling, you've done a lot of work on and with the entertainment industry. We talked last time about the normalizing injustice study that Color of Change did pressing Hollywood in 2020. A new study is expected soon.

ROBINSON: Yeah, in October.

SAFIAN: Any top line previews you can give us?

ROBINSON: We are going to point to progress on a number of shows. I still think that we have to change the floor and push up the ceiling. I think about gay and lesbians on TV in 2006 and 2007, and what would be dead on arrival today? A show like Glee came on, and you saw the attacks. Now you couldn't have a show about a high school and not have kids who were gay or trans or questioning or all of the above.
That change of what the floor looks like constantly pushes up the ceiling. What we are seeing in crime procedural shows, I think, is a number of shows that are getting it much better. We've been in the writer's room for over 20 shows during this 2021, early 2022, helping to engage these shows around storylines around police unions, around internal investigations, around the incentive structures behind policing. But I consistently hear these stories that never end up on these shows because of the way that power works.

We still are in an environment where many of these shows are serving as PR arms for law enforcement. Many of these shows are putting out mis- and disinformation. If we had mis- and disinformation about diabetes or cancer on a hospital show, I think people would think that was a problem. And we have to hold Hollywood accountable for the relationships it has created with law enforcement, where many of these shows are afraid to show law enforcement in negative lights, because they're afraid that they won't be able to film in the cities, or they won't have access to uniforms, or they won't have access to this in order to film.

SAFIN: As you're talking about all of this, all the different areas that you work in, there's a lot of conflict. You're managing conflict and in conflict with lots of organizations all the time.

ROBINSON: Yeah.

SAFIN: Are you stressed by that? Do you get exhausted by it?

ROBINSON: Yes, I do get stressed by it, and I do get exhausted by it. And I used to say no. Only in the last eight months have I really come to terms with, I think, the toll that it takes. The toll that it takes when you de-platform white nationalists, and then you become targeted by white nationalists. So yes, it does stress me out. I also want to be clear that, for me in my entire life, I can think about the protests I've led in high school, the public access show I had on teen issues in high school. Activism has always, for me, been an outlet to help me make sense of injustices.

And so, it would not be true to say it doesn't stress me out, but at the same time, I think I am a fighter, and I feel grateful that I get to wake up every day and fight for things I believe in and fight alongside people that I believe in.

SAFIN: You acknowledge that the last few months you are feeling or seeing that stress in a different way. Are you managing that stress in a different way?

ROBINSON: Yeah. I love to cook, and so I cook a lot. I try to find time with family and friends where Color of Change doesn't come up. When I go to a lot of places, people want to get my perspective of the news story. They've been waiting to talk to me about the thing that I show up and don't want to talk about. There was an exhaustion to the
pandemic, then it became a different exhaustion of having to rebuild a muscle to go out into the public and to have to constantly confront this reality that we're inside of.

SAFIAN: The listeners on the show are business people, entrepreneurs, do you have advice for them about how to think about their approach to responsibility? To the role that their organizations can play in building the kind of society that you dream about?

ROBINSON: What is the go-to-market of what they are currently doing, and start there. Because whatever sort of thing that they're impacting in the world through the business that they're creating or building or sustaining, that is the perfect place to sort of have the impact.

The next thing is to sort of bring the same type of innovation that you would bring to solving any other problems in your business. I've seen CEOs really work to try to not start off the conversation, "Well, we just can't find Black people to work in our company." Start from a different place. You just see better results.

And then the final thing that I would say is to find partners, to find organizations locally or nationally, people who excel at this, people who are focused on equity. All of that, I think, has to be part of the advice.

I think another thing that's incredibly important for business leaders is that racial justice is not just an outcome; racial justice isn't just charity; racial justice is strategy. It is a strategic motivator to action.

When I think about all of the things that actually motivate people, make people stand up, racial justice is one of the strongest force-multipliers we have in our society to move people to action. To get your employees, to get your customers to stand up and stand with you.

And if folks of all races would lean into racial justice more, it could be both sort of the framework that gets more of us to act in ways that are truly making change and a clear way for us to evaluate whether or not that change is actually at the scale that we all deserve.

SAFIAN: Well, Rashad, I want to thank you for helping us understand and stay focused on things in the right areas. And thanks for taking the time to be with us.

ROBINSON: It's great to be with you. Thank you for having me.