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## “Power Is The Ability To Change The Rules”: How Rashad Robinson Holds Companies Accountable

The Color of Change executive director gets companies from PayPal to Fox News to address social issues—whether they want to or not.

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Color of Change executive director **Rashad Robinson** has made a career of persuading media to rethink its portrayal of underrepresented groups. [Photo: [Daniel Dorsa](#)]



BY ADELE PETERS

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When PayPal announced that it would stop processing funding to hate groups in the wake of the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, it came after months of behind-the-scenes conversations with Rashad Robinson's **Color of Change**. In April, his organization successfully campaigned to get *The O'Reilly Factor* canceled by rallying employees of Fox and of the show's advertisers to pressure their companies to take a stand against sexual harassment. Robinson used similar tactics to move companies to withdraw sponsorship from the 2016 Republican National Convention. Here, he talks about finding the right moment to launch a campaign, the difference between presence and power online, and whether companies have a conscience.

**Fast Company:** This past year seems to have marked a turning point for companies taking a stance on issues. We've seen corporate leaders speak out for transgender rights, denounce the travel ban, and respond forcefully to the events in Charlottesville. Do you see this as a sign that companies are genuinely developing a moral compass? Or are activists just becoming more effective?

**Rashad Robinson:** I think this is a sign that people are holding corporations accountable, and that

corporations are increasingly not just listening to consumers, but to their employees as well. It would be a mistake to think that these companies are actually waking up and being more altruistic without forces on the outside. That is not to say that there are not good people that work inside them. It just means they are there to make a profit. If we don't push and press, we are not going to get change. If companies don't view the communities that are making the demands as powerful, then they won't do what we're asking them to do.

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**FC:** After Bill O'Reilly's negative comments about Representative Maxine Waters in March, you relaunched your #DropOReilly campaign—despite being told it was a waste of time, and no amount of public pressure could change Fox News. What made you decide to push anyway?



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**RR:** We never get into these campaigns thinking that they're a slam dunk. I remember people laughing at us when we started our campaign around ALEC [the secretive lobbying organization that pushed for Florida's Stand Your Ground law, which was used to acquit the killer of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin in 2013]. They were saying, "Oh, you're really going to get Coca-Cola to leave ALEC?" Making change inside of big

institutions is hard. But we've learned if you can build up enough energy, make it important to enough people, and create the right narrative, that folks will figure out how to make the change that you're asking for.

**FC:** You were quick to harness the energy and desire for activism that came out of Charlottesville into a [#NoBloodMoney social media campaign](#), along with a website that got consumers to press credit-card companies to stop processing payments to hate groups. How did you know the campaign would gain traction?

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**RR:** Like many organizations, Color of Change put out a statement about Charlottesville. But our most powerful statement was giving people watching the events something clear and strategic to do. To say, "Hey, you are outraged, you are saddened, you are frustrated. And here is something that you can actually do." We didn't have to create a moment. In some ways it's about finding the strategic avenue and giving people the ability to feel useful, to feel like they make a difference. That is important in a democracy. We are a black-led, black civil rights organization, but we are powered by black people and their allies of every race.

**FC:** Even as you engage the larger public, how much are you also working behind the scenes with the companies you are planning to target?

**RR:** Our goal is to get corporations to do the right thing. So just hitting people out of the blue with a bunch of signatures and a petition is not necessarily good organizing. Ninety-five percent of the time, we reach out to them before going public. We often share with them the language, the visuals that we're planning. We give them an opportunity [to respond]. What often happens at these organizations is that there are people inside who are on our side, that are arguing [our case to their colleagues]. We want to make those people as powerful as possible. Then at some point, if a corporation doesn't do what we're asking, we engage the public. What we want to make clear is that we didn't just see what happened in Charlottesville and decide to attack credit-card companies. No one at Mastercard should have been surprised when it happened. In fact, Mastercard should have said, "Oh crap, we've been talking with them since February."

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Color of Change used the outrage over the violence in Charlottesville this past August to pressure credit card companies to disavow white nationalist groups. [Photo: Zach Gibson/AFP/Getty Images]

**FC:** How do you use technology and digital tools to mobilize people online?

**RR:** We have this strategy of respond, build, pivot, and scale. Every day people are being hit with all sorts of information that inspires them, makes them angry, all sorts of things. But if we don't give people something to do in that moment, they go back to doing what they were doing before. So we [issue a call for them to] participate. That's the response. Next, we build momentum by bringing in allies, leveraging social media and influencers, and identifying research that we can expand on radio and TV. Then we have to find the systemic pivot, which is at the core of how we think about ourselves as an organization. We have a framework of not mistaking presence for power. Presence is visibility, it's awareness, it's people paying attention, it's retweets. Power is the ability to change the rules. Sometimes the rules are written—like the written rules of policy—and sometimes they're the unwritten rules of culture. The pivot for us is about changing the rules, changing the system, changing the way business is done. The final piece of this is scale—continuing to keep people engaged in holding corporations accountable. Even as we move to the next campaign, we keep people educated about how all these systems are connected.

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**FC:** What have you observed about the tactics of white supremacists? Are they becoming more sophisticated?

**RR:** From a messaging perspective they've really worked over the years to be less on-their-face threatening. The polo shirts and khakis. Even some of the visible leaders of the alt-right, like Milo [Yiannopoulos], are openly gay. They also understand the organizing [potential] of chat rooms and those platforms that allow them to radicalize, engage, and mobilize people. They use those technologies well. Quite frankly, they've built up enough sophistication and power to make the president of the United States nervous about disappointing them.

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But we need people to understand that racism and inequality and prejudice are not just the caricature of tiki-torch rallies and an unhinged president. They're also about the structural inequalities that happen every single day. And the fear is that [the alt-right] has moved the bar so far out of the mainstream [that it's easy] to think, Well I'm not like that, so I'm not racist, I'm not participating in racist

systems. That's why our campaigns are not going after the racists and the KKK and the Nazis. It's important to go after the institutions that occupy the mainstream and make racism possible.

**FC:** Before joining Color of Change, you oversaw media strategy at GLAAD and focused on changing the way LGBT people are represented on television. When you took over Color of Change six years ago, you tried to launch a campaign against Donald Trump—and NBC's *Celebrity Apprentice*.

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**RR:** I did. I could get no support. Color of Change was much smaller when I took over. Part of the deal, when they hired me from GLAAD, was that they would do more cultural advocacy work. Donald Trump was on *Celebrity Apprentice*, he was going after [President Obama] with conspiracy theories and racist rants about the president's heritage. I was like, This is a perfect campaign. We built it out, but we needed more allies because we were going after NBC. To a person, across the movement, at organizations that we regularly work with now, people were like, "He's a clown, just ignore him." I knew, from my time at GLAAD, the power of media to set the wheels in society and the rules of what's acceptable and what's not. And allowing Donald Trump to be seen as a smart, capable businessman who each week showed up on TV to make decisions, while he was saying these other things, was not something that we should have let stand. Now that he's president, it is interesting to [think of] this

moment, [when] we could have all gone in, to really put him away.

**FC:** What else did you learn from working on LGBT issues that you've taken to Color of Change?

**RR:** When we picked up the phone at GLAAD and called people, when we were concerned [about what their companies were doing], institutions were nervous about disappointing us. When Color of Change was founded [in 2005 by James Rucker and Van Jones], no one was nervous about disappointing black people. That was at the heart of black people being on their roofs [in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina], begging for the government to do something, and literally being left to die. Institutions were not nervous. So [I think about], how do you build power that forces decision makers to be nervous? How do I build the type of power for black communities that makes for real change?

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Color of Change's executive director, **Rashad Robinson**, has impacted the corporate policy of companies from Fox News to PayPal. [Photo: [Daniel Dorsa](#)]

### **30-SECOND BIO: RASHAD ROBINSON**

**Hometown:** Riverhead, New York

**Previous Jobs:** Senior director of media programs for GLAAD; director of communications at the Right to Vote Campaign; national field director of Fairvote; hosted a public-access news talk show in high school

**Education:** Bachelor's degree in political science from Marymount University; served as student-

body president for two years

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adele Peters is a senior writer at Fast Company who focuses on solutions to climate change and other global challenges, interviewing leaders from **Al Gore** and **Bill Gates** to emerging climate tech entrepreneurs like **Mary Yap**. She contributed to the bestselling book *Worldchanging: A User's Guide for the 21st Century* and a new book from Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies called *State of Housing Design 2023 More*

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