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GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS BACKCHANNEL OCT 25, 2016 6:55 AM

How to Build a Civil Rights Movement for the Digital Age

Activist Rashad Robinson is leveraging decentralized platforms to give a voice to the voiceless, not just to get them heard, but to make a real difference.



Rashad Robinson, head of Color of Change, the nation's largest online civil rights organization. JOE PUGLIESE

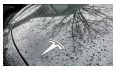
ON THE FOURTH and final morning of last summer's Democratic National Convention, Rashad Robinson rose early, selected a hat to match his suit, and traveled via Uber to a converted industrial WeWork installation in an otherwise barren and unprepossessing section of Northeast Philadelphia. Robinson runs Color of Change, the nation's largest online civil rights organization, and he was taking an hour out of a grueling convention schedule (panels, parties) to tape an episode of a political reality show.

The program was called *Party Girls*, and it followed a handful of first-time voters, all of them millennial women of color, through the rigors of a crash course in electoral politics. Robinson had been called to appear in his usual role as an avatar of social justice's future. "FDR had radio," he told me late the night before, when I asked him why he'd agreed to the show when so much else was going on, "and JFK had TV. Obama had the Internet." Now is the age of reality television and social media. The problem with that landscape, he continued, is that "the villain is the star. You get followers by being harsh." Robinson wanted to demonstrate, especially to younger activists, that social-media strategy could be about more than simple, incendiary cultivation of rage and shame.

Party Girls was being filmed in an overheated cubby of a WeWork office, and Robinson stood out against the overeager decor of chipped, exposed concrete, midcentury-modern knockoffs, and a Ping-Pong conference table. He wore a three-piece suit with a faint pinstripe and had chosen, from his extensive hat rotation, a blue felt fedora with brown piping. His head is a dimpled sphere in the shadow of these hats, which seem to float a millimeter above the hairline on the updraft of his smile. It had been days since Robinson had managed more than three or four hours of sleep, but he nonetheless had the glint of a newly minted copper.

THE REALITY SHOW contestants filed in, introduced themselves around, and seemed immediately at ease in the company of someone whose appearance both resembled and undermined that of the traditional authority figure. He told them how Color of Change had been founded in the

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aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, in the late summer of 2005. The image that had inspired political activists James Rucker and Van Jones (now a regular CNN contributor) to establish the organization, Robinson said, was of "black folks literally on their roofs begging for something to happen." These were the very early days of online organizing; back then, just the notion of a large email list—as antiquated as this idea seems now—promised communication on an unprecedented scale. If the TV networks were sluggish to cover stories like Katrina, Color of Change would bypass those legacy outlets. Their first email went out to some 1,000 people a few weeks after Katrina hit. The subject line read, in its entirety, "Kanye was right."

The Party Girls contestants had been perhaps 8 or 9 years old at the time, but they didn't have to be reminded of what Kanye had been right about: that George W. Bush didn't care about black people. Robinson continued, "They had some T-shirts made at the time that said Kanye was right. They're collectors' items now. But, the thing is—" he broke off into a sly, sheepish smile. One woman giggled. "You don't know when you can wear them or not?"

Robinson, who says he has no poker face, lit up as though he'd tasted something sweet. "Yeah! You never know which news cycle you're in." (On any given day, Kanye West might be comparing himself to Picasso, Steve Jobs, or God.) "So you can't really wear it around unless you're up on things."

> "Black people were on their roofs after Katrina and the government did nothing. No one was afraid of disappointing black people."

The joke captured something profound about the problem of concentrated leadership; if black activism depends on the consistency of someone like Kanye, there might be some distractions on the way to

structural change. Over the decade since Color of Change was founded, as social-media campaigns have driven crowds into Tahrir Square and Ferguson, the advantages and drawbacks of decentralized tactics have become clear. The process works well in the quicksilver proliferation of broad sentiment—fury, elation, despair—and can in turn prompt spontaneous protest in the streets. This sort of action draws a lot of attention to what's wrong, and such methods propelled Color of Change's early growth: Through petitions and hashtags, they mobilized their membership to make MSNBC fire conservative commentator Pat Buchanan on grounds of racial dog-whistling and pushed for Lou Dobbs' resignation from CNN.

But, as Robinson likes to remind people, hashtag activism couldn't get indictments for the killers of Eric Garner or Tamir Rice. Robinson took over the organization in 2011, and the slogan he introduced was "Presence to Power." He and his colleagues believe that their role is to help online civil rights expand beyond mere visibility. Robinson had just been at the Republican National Convention, in Cleveland, and had seen little point to the protests there, however genuine their motivation. "People protest outside, as if the RNC cares. They'll just go and take pictures and use them for fund-raising. Black people were on their roofs after Katrina and the government did nothing. No one was afraid of disappointing black people."

The end is real accountability. "Digital organizing can become very clickbaity," says Arisha Hatch, Color of Change's managing director of campaigns and executive director of the Color of Change Political Action Committee. "The metric that we care about most is real-world impact. Each time we have what we think of as a campaign victory, we try to ask ourselves, is this a systemic change that has benefits for black people over time?"

> "What we need to get away from is any campaign where you can say 'If we win

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> this, we would only win this.'"



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Robinson and Color of Change, with offices in New York, Oakland, Hollywood, and DC, are uniquely positioned to address the problem of the systemic in the age of the personal. Unlike many of the newer civil rights organizations—Million Hoodies, Dream Defenders, the Black Youth Project, and many other groups broadly associated with Black Lives Matter—Color of Change does not focus on direct action; and unlike large, legacy civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, it keeps its distance from the cordial centers of established power. Its role is to operate at one level of generational remove in either direction: All of its institutional resources are devoted to the question of how to bring together the even keel of strong leadership and the vitality of the grassroots. Robinson, at 38, is young enough to get Snapchat (sort of) and old enough to remember (if only barely) the evening news as the final arbiter of credibility. "The march was the right technology when you could control the news cycle for a week," Robinson says. With a valiant plenipotentiary at the head of an epic assembly, you could create days of drama and suspense. "Now three hours later the march is all cleaned up like a parade."

"What we need to get away from," Robinson told the Party Girls, "is any campaign where you can say 'If we win this, we would only win this.'" Could online activism, for example, change the fact, reported in a recent study by the Women Donors Network, that 85 percent of prosecutors in America—those with the most discretionary power in our judicial system—run unopposed, and 95 percent of them are white? If so, how? For this to happen, the community needs new models of institutional endurance.

"We need to build long-term infrastructure that doesn't rely on me," Robinson says with a macabre but unfortunately germane double entendre, "as the person who dies at his desk."

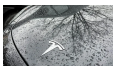
ROBINSON, DESPITE HIS professional reservations about individual leadership, was a political celebrity in Philadelphia. The Color of Change PAC had just led

a wildly successful campaign to demand that corporations withdraw their sponsorship of the Republican National Convention, which ended up millions of dollars in the red. Wherever he went, people crossed the street to greet him, or they leaned down against his shoulder for a cameo in their Snapchats. Strangers approached him and asked for selfies. They'd tweet them and then ask, as an afterthought, if he'd do them the favor of a retweet. In our first five minutes at the convention he was embraced with equal ardor by Mary Kay Henry, president of the Service Employees International Union, and activist-comedian W. Kamau Bell. Robinson's favorite congressmember, Minnesota's Keith Ellison, broke out of a media scrum to shout praise over the heads of millennial camerapeople: "I'm so happy you can take on the things we can't take on, if you know what I mean."

Robinson's most beloved interactions, however, are with people who've used Color of Change's platform, OrganizeFor, to mount their own campaigns. A young man in full patriotic getup—blue blazer, Nantucket-red pants, blue and white polka-dotted shirt—who couldn't have been older than 30, came over and threw his arms around Robinson, then posed for a selfie. Robinson introduced him as Jamarr. He was a prime example of Color of Change's idea that you can set an initially low bar for engagement in the hopes you might carry people along; maybe the first thing someone does is share a link on Facebook, then you get them to sign a petition, then attend a rally, and then agree to use the group's home phone-banking technology to call voters in swing states. "Jamarr," Robinson says, "started the campaign on our site that got the Confederate flag taken down in South Carolina."

Robinson, though this is something he generally prefers not to publicize, owes his career—or, at the very least, his rapid ascent—to the visibility that comes from reality television. Robinson grew up with NPR-listening parents in Riverhead, New York, the wine country of Long Island. He went to high school there (where his senior class voted him, alongside Bill Clinton, as their favorite politician) and then moved to Washington, DC, for college (where, at Marymount University in Arlington, he served as student-body president). After graduating, in the early years of the

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Bush administration, he lived in an activist flophouse with young labor organizers and worked on voting-rights issues. Almost everyone who approached Robinson at the convention claimed to have known him from way back, the most status accrued to those who knew him when he had dreadlocks down his back. (He now keeps his hair buzzed close, for reasons related, presumably, to both aging and hats.) In 2004, Robinson and an old friend were selected as contestants for a short-lived Showtime program, hosted by Montel Williams, called *American Candidate*. It introduced young activists to the mechanics of electoral campaigns. Robinson was the youngest candidate on the show. He and his partner vanquished all of the other progressive teams only to lose, in the finals, to a Christian conservative.

> "Robinson is not using his platform to get people to stand behind him. He is using it to let a million-plus people speak for themselves."

American Candidate gave Robinson experience with such political operatives as Frank Luntz and Donna Brazile, as well as an introduction to polling and focus groups. The show may not have been a ratings triumph, but according to Robinson it was extremely popular with political nerds of all persuasions. His first job interview after the show, with the gay rights organization GLAAD, happened to be with a huge fan. He got the job, and one of his first campaigns there involved the carefully choreographed and public issuance of failing grades to most of the major networks for their lack of gay and lesbian characters. A few months later, he had the studios coming to him for counsel, with scripts on his desk for a show called *Modern Family* and one called *Glee*. He spent the rest of his five years at GLAAD consulting with the studios not only about the proportion of their gay characters but also about the richness and quality of their representation. In 2011, he was recruited by Rucker to

take over at Color of Change. Back then, it was a $650,000 organization with a staff of half a dozen. In five years, Robinson has transformed it into an organization with a $7 million budget, a staff of 40, and a mailing list of more than a million people.

In the process, Robinson had to refashion himself. The successful battle for gay marriage had been a predominantly top-down affair, a legally oriented scheme orchestrated in painstaking detail by men and women of resources and clout. This accounts, in part, for how swiftly it succeeded. Robinson started at GLAAD not long after Gavin Newsom, then the mayor of San Francisco, had decreed by fiat that his city would perform gay marriages, and then left the organization right before the first same-sex couples were legally wed in New York. What he found, upon taking the helm at Color of Change, was that such a strategy wasn't suitable for contemporary black activism. Now what often had to be changed weren't just laws—the choke hold that killed Eric Garner wasn't, after all, legal—but cultural norms and expectations.

As Van Jones puts it to me, "Black folks usually grab onto one or two big heterosexual male leaders. Then everyone gets behind them. That's Frederick Douglas. Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. DuBois. Martin and Malcolm. Reverends Jackson and Sharpton. That's Obama, in a lot of ways. But now here comes Rashad Robinson, shattering the old model. He is not using his big tech platform to get people to stand behind him. He is using it to give voice to others—to let a million-plus people speak for themselves."

ROBINSON LEARNED HIS first great lesson in the importance of technology to civil rights while doing some research for activist legend Julian Bond, a founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Bond told him about how all long-distance phone calls in the 1960s South were operator-to-operator, which meant that the local power structure—including, often, the Klan—controlled and surveilled their communications; to circumvent that, SNCC paid to install a WATS line, a precursor to 800 numbers. Of course, it wasn't long before law enforcement tapped those too. As Brandi Collins, Robinson's campaign director, puts it, there's a reason that "black people overindex new

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technologies. It allows people of limited resources to challenge powerful structures." The geek in Robinson thus understood that the necessary foundation for the success of all future efforts was net neutrality.

> In a country where almost no large media organizations are run by women or black people, Robinson argued, net neutrality is the only way to maintain some balance.

This wasn't the sort of cause ordinarily associated with civil rights, and in fact it put Color of Change in conflict with the big legacy civil rights institutions. The telecoms convinced organizations like the NAACP that the provision of Internet access to underserved communities was more important than neutrality and that it would only be financially feasible for them to build out the access if they were allowed to manipulate speeds and fees for differential usage. (The telecom providers are also large donors to the legacy institutions; Color of Change does not accept corporate philanthropy.) The telecoms claimed that the right to prioritize certain packets—bits of Internet traffic—was like the right to edit a newspaper; they simply placed things in the order of editorial priority. Robinson's response was that it was exactly the newspapers that had covered the experiences of black people during Katrina and in Ferguson poorly, late, or not at all. In a country where almost no large media organizations are run by women or black people, Robinson argued, net neutrality is at present the only way to maintain at least some communicative balance. Without Title II protections in the Telecommunications Act, activist emails might not travel as fast as others or might somehow disappear along the way. "Don't forget," Robinson says, "that our entire organization was founded by a single email."

Even Robinson's point about editing was itself similarly edited in the media. He had long been a

fixture on MSNBC, but once he took a public stand on net neutrality, the network, which is majority-owned by Comcast, canceled all of his bookings on the subject. While an industry representative, on air on MSNBC, debunked an op-ed Robinson had written in The New York Times, Robinson sat and watched from his apartment, 40 blocks from 30 Rock. “Imagine,” Robinson says, “changing policy in that environment!”

> Social-media pressure sometimes works best, Robinson believes, when it doesn’t have to be used at all.

One of his strategies in the net neutrality campaign was to enlist the help of politician and civil rights leader John Lewis, who went around telling people that he wished he’d had open Internet when he was a young organizer. “How does anyone respond to that?” Robinson says. People couldn’t, and the campaign this spring—in part because Obama himself came out in favor of net neutrality in 2014—was won. The campaign soon came full circle. After the Orlando shooting, House democrats convened a sit-in on the congressional floor about gun control. The Republican leadership turned off the microphones, but there was John Lewis himself, live on Periscope.

One irony of Robinson’s work is that his organization pursues broad, systemic change via the media apparatuses that most relentlessly personalize every issue. But social-media pressure sometimes works best, Robinson believes, when it doesn’t have to be used at all. Take, for example, the group’s campaign to get companies to divest from the RNC. First, the Color of Change PAC sends letters to high-ranking corporate officers, explaining the campaign’s concerns, in this case the belief that good corporate citizens shouldn’t support Donald Trump’s racism, misogyny, and xenophobia. Members follow up with phone calls that personalize the issue. Then the centerpiece of the effort is unveiled, ideally in person

across a boardroom table with corporate leaders: a complete mock-up of what the public campaign will look like, including renderings of the relevant splash page, Facebook site, and email blast. At that point the target generally has 48 hours to respond before the public campaign commences.

Negative campaigns—leveraging publicity to prevent people from doing something harmful—are more handily won than constructive ones. Over the course of four days in Philadelphia, Robinson took every available occasion to change the subject from retrospective celebration of the RNC triumph to his aspirations for the campaign Color of Change PAC is running now: to intervene in district attorney races. As he pointed out over and over, prosecutors wield more discretionary power than anyone else in the criminal justice system. At a panel he moderated, one of the contributors said that for every Alton Sterling or Philando Castile there were literally thousands of incidents every day in which a prosecutor decided whether to charge someone with a misdemeanor or a felony—which today amounts to what the panelist called an "economic death sentence." We usually hear very little about DA races. When President Obama, in his convention address, mentioned the importance of DA races, Robinson tweeted it as a personal victory.

> Today's open, decentralized platforms, bypassing the cable and broadcast networks, have made the Color of Change movement possible.

The real victories, however, came later in the summer, when two of the candidates Color of Change PAC had supported in their DA primaries won, in large part because of the organization's efforts. In Orlando they bought lists of cell phone numbers for black users, cross-referenced them with voter files, and set up local volunteers with peer-to-peer voter-outreach tools developed by the Bernie

Sanders campaign. The technology allowed people to phone from home, via a web dialer, a script, and some training; they could also exchange text messages about polling places and hours. They ousted a sitting white state attorney in favor of a black woman, a former prosecutor and public defender with a husband who had been formerly incarcerated. She'll be running unopposed in the general election. It's a small victory, but to Robinson it's proof of concept.

It's also proof that there can be viable online organizing tools outside of consolidated corporate power. Today's open, decentralized platforms, bypassing the cable and broadcast networks, have made the movement possible. But in a country where black people and women own almost no media, there's no reason to believe they'll act any differently than the old media giants. Twitter has chosen to largely ignore racist and misogynist abuse. Facebook manipulates what users see and read. James Rucker, who founded Color of Change and for years personally ensured its solvency, couldn't, like many black people, get an Airbnb reservation in New York for his own organization's board meeting.

Airbnb, keen to the public relations problem it had on its hands, was sponsoring a big BET party one night after the speeches at the DNC. On the one hand, Robinson doesn't like to miss a party, especially one full of his friends and constituents. Besides, in the face of so much systemic racism, how meager a protest his demurral would make. On the other, he was, despite his ambivalence about the role, an increasingly visible leader. We stood on the street outside the party. Sweaty people emerged from the club amid gusts of laughter. Robinson stood for a moment, unusually quiet and alone. He called an Uber.

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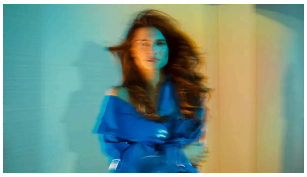
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