

## COMMUNICATION

# The life of “ideas worth spreading”

TED turns 40 in a rapidly evolving media landscape

By Alex Gomez-Marin

“Ideas worth spreading” has long been the visionary slogan of TED, the US-Canadian media organization famous for its punchy lectures known as TED Talks. Founded 40 years ago by architect and graphic designer Richard Saul Wurman and broadcast designer Harry Marks, TED—an acronym meant to convey the group’s interest in technology, entertainment, and design—launched its first conference in 1984, and, after some years of financial trouble, the events resumed in 1990 with annual conferences that attracted assorted speakers and enthusiast audiences with a transdisciplinary vibe filled with curiosity and excitement.

In 2001, entrepreneur Chris Anderson acquired the brand and became its curator. In 2006, recordings of the high-priced exclusive events started to be posted online for free, some reaching tens of millions of views. Then, in 2009, the TEDx program was created, allowing for independently organized events following TED’s recipe. These moves catapulted the company globally as a major platform promoting “powerful ideas, powerfully presented” and settling it as a fascinating case study for the democratization of elitism.

Today, TED has become a very mixed bag, covering all sorts of topics—from creativity and poverty to procrastination and orgasms—and featuring speakers ranging from Naomi Klein and Monica Lewinsky to Bono and yours truly. The growth of such a global media empire has been staggering, with talks translated into 100 languages and watched billions of times. However, as the numbers have exploded, has the quality imploded? The hyperbolic insistence on inspirational ideas seems to have banalized them. To be quite honest, I have not watched a TED Talk in a long time.

Are humans capable of absorbing a life-changing idea every 20 min, applauding, and then moving on to the next one? What is the point of a talk on the seven rules for making successful seven-rule talks? Or about the significance of water when you are thirsty? Making what is trivial sound profound is hardly a new art form. Moreover, the

“thought leader” fragrance may seduce, but it is often cloying, even risible. TED’s clichéd style is both loved and hated.

Regardless of one’s personal feelings about the platform, TED’s impact on the media landscape, and particularly on science outreach, is noteworthy. The talks have popularized an idiosyncratic way of communicating ideas, elevating the aesthetics of staging and putting format on equal footing with content. TED Talks have also helped academics reach wildly wider audiences, raising the bar of our communication skills by spurring conciseness, expressive body language, and stunning slides. Science is storytelling too, after all. Teaching and lecturing have thus become an educated way of entertaining and networking.

However, the diversity of views available to us ossifies and suffocates as our algorithmic echo chambers turn the virtual “public square” into a pit of fear, anger, and division. In turn, the globalization of ideas has incited their pasteurization, resulting in shadow banning and gaslighting when internet arbiters deem material infectious to society’s noosphere. TED has not been immune to unfortunate controversies, including the cancellation of some provocative presentations. As it turns out, some ideas are not worth spreading.

The printed word has relentlessly dominated society for the last half millennium. But we now seem to be going through an archaic revival in the age of screens, expanding our personal Plato’s caves through



TED reimaged traditional lecture formats, emphasizing aesthetics and performance as key factors in communicating big ideas to broad audiences.

What, if anything, makes TED’s content special today? Its current challenges mirror the opportunities of a vibrant, evolving, and uncertain media landscape. We are saturated daily with an ever-growing, overwhelming bulk of new content, mercilessly sinking in the bottomless ocean that is the internet. Content creators must also deal with the hard problem of attention and its puzzling timescales: from the 18-s torpid TikTok clip, to the TED Talk’s 18-min golden rule, to the booming 180-min long-conversation format. Furthermore, podcasting has completely opened the gates to self-managed curation, directly matching audiences and content that would be mutually inaccessible otherwise.

images and the spoken word. Nonetheless, the near future of content generated by artificial intelligence poses an unfathomable threat to thought and society. Real conversations—with real people and real voices—are the midwifery of ideas. Chatbots are the end of real talks.

TED’s new tagline is “Ideas change everything,” and its updated mission reads as follows: “Discover and spread ideas that spark conversation, deepen understanding, and drive meaningful change.” I can only hope that, beyond personal posturing and professional branding, it can truly embody that spirit. ■

The reviewer is at the Instituto de Neurociencias, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas—Universidad Miguel Hernández de Elche, Alicante, Spain. Email: agomezmarin@gmail.com

10.1126/science.ado2829