The Pathos of TED Talks

In 1984, the first TED conference ever took place in Monterey, CA. The conference included a demo of the compact disk, e-book and 3D graphics from Lucas film (TED). Although initially unsuccessful, TED talks/conferences today are considered a premier avenue for innovators in every field to share their ideas with the public. The tradition of someone standing on a stage and talking about a topic is nothing new- nor is it particularly innovative. As soon as man realized he had a voice, he took it upon himself to share that voice with anyone who would listen. This leads me to question of what it is about TED talks that makes them so captivating, leading thousands of people every year to justify spending a minimum of $6,000 for a regular admission ticket to a TED conference. After examination of transcriptions of the top 25 TED (TED) talks of all time through the topic modeling and text analysis tool of MALLET and AntConc, I posit that it is pathos driven appeals that have catalyzed the success of TED talks rather than seemingly new or innovative ideas.

Disregarding the first two rows of the Figure 1, the topic modeled in row three suggests the consistent theme of interpersonal relationships, as well as the theme of time and how people choose to spend that time. The grouping of the words “people,” “years,” “friends,” and “give” all are especially significant when considering what the overall goals of TED are. Such personal and, for the most part, objective themes are not usually present in lectures oriented towards topics related to technology, education, and design. This trend continues as one moves down the list of popular topics. Topic ID #49, which is positioned as the fifth most frequent topic, features words like “kind,” “work/working,” “feel” and “sense.” From these themes, it is reasonable to conclude that people largely look to TED talks not for educational purposes, but rather so that these talks can act as virtual life coaches, offering them wisdom and life advice. Even without MALLET,
this function of TED talks as virtual life coaches is clear after just skimming through the titles of
the top 25 TED talks. While TED offers more educational and informative videos, the top 25
consists of videos like “How to Make Stress your Friend” by Kelly McGonigal and “Your
Elusive Creative Genius” by Elizabeth Gilbert, clearly aiming for a more motivational rather
than academic theme.

Figure 1: This Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was generated using MALLET. The frequencies were then sorted from highest to lowest.
To further elaborate on the theme of time and how people spend their time, one can also examine Figure 2 - the most frequent word list. Secondary only to “people,” “time” retains high in frequency and significance even when processed through a different text analysis software. However, it should also be taken into account that much of the reason for the high frequency of the word “time” is because of the anecdotal nature of many of the TED talk transcriptions. This anecdotal nature lends itself to usage of “time” in phrases like “at that time” and “first time,” rather than the actual discussion of the concept of time (Figure 4).

Other aspects of the world list compiled by AntConc are consistent with the topics modeled by MALLET. For example, both programs feature positive attribute words like “happy,” “happiness,” “good,” and “positive,” while returning low frequencies of more negatively attributed words like “bad,” “negative,” “sad,” or “depression.” It is a reasonable theory that because of the TED presenters
adept use of pathos to sympathize and connect with the audience, audiences of TED talks often see themselves in the presenters and therefore are more receptive to the use of positive attributes to describe their experiences. Audiences often project their own desire and ambitions onto whatever form of media they are consuming— including TED talks. Therefore, it follows logically that audiences want to see the subject of their media portrayed in a positive light, because it means that they themselves have those same positive attributes and by extension have the same potential for greatness that many of the TED presenters do. Audiences’ affinity for TED talks featuring positive attributes may also be a commentary on the general hedonistic/pleasure based perspective that currently thrives in the age of mass media and consumerism.

Although I suggest that it is the sympathetic/empathetic effect that TED presenters create through invoking a common human experience in topics like “time” and “personal relationships” and not the originality of the content itself that propels certain TED talks to success, this is not to say that the TED presenters are not innovative and/or original. I only imply that the originality and substance of a TED talk is secondary to the way it makes audience members feel. From this implication, one can deduce that the purpose of TED talks may be shifting from their original
intention as a means of sharing innovative ideas with the public in an easy to understand lecture, to virtual life coaches that people turn to for the purpose of assuaging their own fears. This shift in the purpose of TED talks is not necessarily good or bad, however, it does seem to be a microcosm for what is happening in society at a larger scale. On a larger scale, mass media and consumerism has brought about the need for instant gratification in all aspects of life, even in areas concerning complex topics like those covered in the top 25 TED talks like the passage of time and the formation of personal relationships. As a result, people turn to TED talks and expect these 10-20 minute videos to serve as solutions to deep rooted fears and anxieties. Of course, it is human nature to seek comfort and familiarity. However, for the advancement of society, it is more important that people step out of this comfort zone and seek education over comfort, even if this require more mental effort.
Works Cited
