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.

44	1.46107 laughter 01 11 10 don things 13 15 ve 16 thing 14 back 17 19 human 18 put work
6	1.20698 04 08 07 05 00 02 03 applause 09 time 06 start 12 good 20 21 long show 50 day
14	0.52456 people years don time make making feel made man give part talking 000 friends worked year telling day wasn difference
35	0.36616 ve guy question hand find 05 coming side 41 night won answer entire completely 22 starts driving times stopped create
49	0.35557 work kind today working feel sense lives talk makes world works career doesn models writing stuff great call means living
7	0.34354 don change find happy make times percent year real harvard students room number turns give question single power opposite group
20	0.21743 world inside thought made understand thing computer dr moving live 12 realized place wall learning phone sense total hours lab
25	0.15287 people creativity talked place children fact years room turned job night speak sat student full evidence university child moved original
41	0.10681 experiment mind released state man psychological synthesized psychologists pick normal 43 chose trick hospital headquarters directly closer stuck leads reversible
37	0.09566 energy felt ve pain body card business morning present information normal boston problem arm brains beautiful pushed brother ball experience
9	0.08969 education school 22 future world isn earth children grow system interest wonderful wasn royal extraordinary home women heads frankly form
45	0.08085 dollars 5 tv car gestures media goal neocortex communicate dvr feeling diane shift surfaced moral interactions talent larger incredible integrity
24	0.07788 study relationships life good lives health men age family 75 close lonely learned adults tracked 80s lessons turn adult teenagers
19	0.07136 monkey procrastinator monster panic brain deadlines deadline months rational term paper write decision maker place things dark ted happen playground
22	0.06222 work candle science rewards performance autonomy reward motivation tasks motivators great mastery law business solution purpose offered problems mismatch incentives
38	0.05946 world culture target tr countries resources god woman significance beliefs decide court variety exciting violence haven meaning angry cheering equals
2	0.05395 house landscape internalized lose glimpse greece engineering comfortable dancer live changed assigned frighteningly exquisite reconciliations spins aging tricky divinity professionalsand
42	0.05343 power minutes powerful feel high body low nonverbals feeling testosterone cortisol till fake language change poses supposed interview bodies powerless
46	0.05339 stress response heart study oxytocin hormone stressful body experienced year pounding faster social healthier physical life support risk view lot
18	0.05291 hand ar pocket attention joe sir play watch game frank shoulder squeeze wallet watching color money check inside hold eyes
23	0.05191 brain positive happiness average sister world success negative amy school formula found reality graph unicorn bunk bed bobo classroom levels
15	0.05119 sort minds experience 20 judgments lab couple dominance tiny differences college physician effect hormones handshake classroom predict thrown faces evidence
26	0.04788 book kind start writer mental lit interview pencil saved peculiar southern exist ultimately distance love bother anguish doomed referring mystery
3	0.04348 minutes breath started record hold heart basically breathe holding water wanted breathing rate feet body doctors learned long underwater seconds
34	0.04257 orgasm semen dead trigger women men woman johnson masters kinsey reflex book pig clitoris artificial velde de sexual journal marriage
33	0.04175 objects digital physical paper camera information interested everyday mouse technology india interact computing device system ca gesture back part mit
12	0.04064 problem businesses school management intrinsic solve group experiment set encyclopedia 21st economists case company based america created university rowe medium
10	0.0403 life emotion aye money love decisions emotions focus decision certainty map shit destiny contribute food uncertainty million shaped significant shapes
39	0.03674 longer blood oxygen slow o2 stayed magician co2 city attack drop impossible brain hard 150 levels wasn damage helps challenge
28	0.03453 story stories books mother nigerians lagos fide power mexicans beer ginger failed began reading shame libraries immigration dignity number workshops
11	0.03439 Introverts kids ideas introversion extrovert camp social favorite sitting solitude rowdie culture leaders workplaces bias leadership wilderness prove early science
0	0.03436 vulnerability connection research call numb thought shame love struggle courage belonging storyteller stories researcher understand feel therapist vulnerable worthiness worthy
16	0.03434 laughter 01 solomon email gold gummy emails nelson mandela winnie blah kgs shipping business condition james turned health transfer scam
27	0.03433 07 gillian kids 03 intelligence dance wrong ballet shakespeare drawing girl stratford capacities los teacher find public minutes human creative

Figure 1: This Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was generated using MALLET. The frequencies were then sorted from highest to lowest

Word Ty	pes: 5	804	Word Tokens:	22286	Search Hits:	0
Rank	Freq	Word				
1	345	people				
2	142	time				
3	120	world				
4	117	things				
5	117	work				
6	111	life				
7	110	make				
8	109	thing				
9	98	years				
10	91	brain				
11	89	back				
12	80	stress				
13	76	feel				
14	68	minutes				
15	67	good				
16	65	human				
17	65	thought				
18	63	kind				
19	61	start				
20	58	put				
21	57	find				
22	57	give				
23	57	love				
24	56	hand				
25	56	year				
26	54	talk				
27	53	change				

Figure 2: Word list compiled by Antconc showing words for greatest to least frequency, excluding common stop words like "the," "a," and annotations in the transcription like "laughter" and "applause."

Word Ty	pes:	5804	Word Tokens:	22286	Search Hits:	0
Rank	Freq	Word				
28	53	kb				
29	53	story				
30	52					
31	52	day				
		power				
32	51	job				
33	48	body				
34	48	person				
35	47	called				
36	47	educatio	n			
37	47	show				
38	46	long				
39	46	mind				
40	45	left				
41	43	happines	SS			
42	43	started				
43	42	call				
44	42	idea				
45	42	made				
46	40	great				
47	40	system				
48	39	heart				
49	39	part				
50	39	study				
51	39	times				
52	39	wanted				
53	38	hold				
54	38	importan	it			

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,"

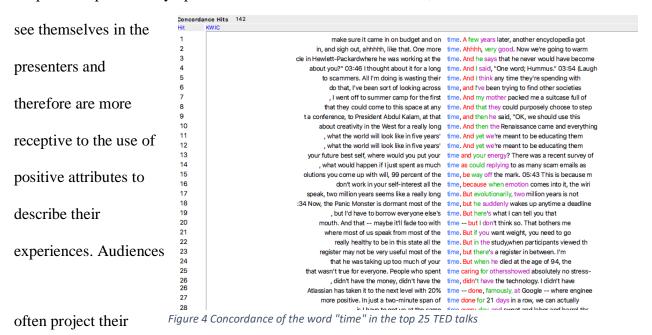
Other aspects of the world list compiled by AntConc are consistent with the topics modeled by MALLET. For example, both programs feature positive attribute words like "happy," "happiness," "good," and "positive," while returning low frequencies of more negatively attributed words like "bad,"

rather than the actual discussion of the concept

of time (Figure 4).

[&]quot;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



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

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