

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,

Word Types: 5804		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 Types: 5804		Word Tokens: 22286	Search Hits: 0
Rank	Freq	Word	
27	53	change	
28	53	kb	
29	53	story	
30	52	day	
31	52	power	
32	51	job	
33	48	body	
34	48	person	
35	47	called	
36	47	education	
37	47	show	
38	46	long	
39	46	mind	
40	45	left	
41	43	happiness	
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	important	

Figure 3: Continuation of Figure 2

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 word 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

Concordance Hits 142	
Hit	KWIC
1	make sure it came in on budget and on
2	in, and sigh out, ahhhhh, like that. One more
3	cle in Hewlett-Packard where he was working at the
4	about you?" 03:46 I thought about it for a long
5	to scammers. All I'm doing is wasting their
6	do that, I've been sort of looking across
7	, I went off to summer camp for the first
8	that they could come to this space at any
9	ta conference, to President Abdul Kalam, at that
10	about creativity in the West for a really long
11	, what the world will look like in five years'
12	, what the world will look like in five years'
13	your future best self, where would you put your
14	, what would happen if I just spent as much
15	olutions you come up with will, 99 percent of the
16	don't work in your self-interest all the
17	speak, two million years seems like a really long
18	:34 Now, the Panic Monster is dormant most of the
19	, but I'd have to borrow everyone else's
20	mouth. And that -- maybe it'll fade too with
21	where most of us speak from most of the
22	really healthy to be in this state all the
23	register may not be very useful most of the
24	that he was taking up too much of your
25	that wasn't true for everyone. People who spent
26	, didn't have the money, didn't have the
26	Atlassian has taken it to the next level with 20%
27	more positive. In just a two-minute span of
28	in there to get us at the same

Figure 4 Concordance of the word "time" in the top 25 TED talks

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

“History of TED.” *TED*, TED (Technology, Education, Design), <https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization/history-of-ted>

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