

TED Talks as an Emergent Genre

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**Abstract:** In her article "TED Talks as an Emergent Genre" Julia Ludewig analyzes TED talks—short, informational, and entertaining presentations that are given during TED conferences in North America and abroad—as a hybrid and emerging genre. Based on a qualitative interpretation of 14 such talks, she offers a list of recurring thematic, argumentative, and rhetorical features, which she aligns with three parent genres—the sales pitch, the memoir, and the academic lecture. Comparing recent versions of TED talks with three older talks from the 1980s and 1990s, she suggests an historical trajectory, which emphasizes the professional performance character of recent talks and their popularization through highly sophisticated and sharable video footage.

## Julia LUDEWIG

### TED Talks as an Emergent Genre

With millions of listeners and consumers in lecture halls and online—TED estimated the number of views for November 2012 at 1 billion (<<https://www.ted.com/about/programs-initiatives/ted-talks>>)—TED talks are a new media success story. The characteristically short talks (which often deal with issues of technology, entertainment, and design, or TED for short), together with the framing TED conferences, have attracted much attention in the news, and increasingly, in academe. The first of the now-biannual TED conferences was held in 1984 in Monterey, California. In just over thirty years, these conferences have produced independently-organized offshoots, so-called TEDx conferences, all over the world. Today, TED and TEDx talks cover more than just technology, entertainment, and design; they feature presentations about themes such as architecture, mental health, history, and popular culture. When TED launched its website <<http://www.ted.com>> in 2006 and started uploading videos of selected talks, TED entered a new phase of distribution. As a result, the talks have at least two distinct and overlapping audiences. There is a primary audience at the conferences, and a secondary audience for video recordings of conferences as they are published online on TED's own website, its YouTube channel, a private website or blog. It is important to note, however, that not all conference talks appear on the website, which means that the web presents a curated selection. In other words, the conference attendees have access to talks that are not available to the virtual public.

Most observations and analyses focus on the educational quality of TED talks or the lack thereof. The talks have been hailed, for example, as a "powerful way to convey an innovative idea to a giant global audience" (Holly, <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/krisztinaholly/2013/11/14/so-you-want-to-give-a-ted-talk/-660e87f030a9>>), a "cultural touchstone" (Clark, <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/dorieclark/2014/01/02/how-to-give-a-ted-worthy-talk/-3c7fa3195683>>), and the "ultimate brain spa" (Hendrickson, <<http://www.ladiesdc.org/tedx-mid-atlantic-the-ultimate-brain-spa/>>), while others have called them "corporate, evangelical," and "noninclusive" (Jurgenson, <<http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/against-ted/>>). Yet the talks are interesting for more than their educational value or their viral spread. Increasingly, the talks have gained attention as a type of talk that can be seen as an emergent discourse genre. In fact, many commentators use generic descriptors. Thus TED talks are compared to "enthusiastic sales pitches" (Tsou, Thelwall, Mongeon, and Sugimoto, "A Community of Curious Souls" 4), or "middlebrow megachurch infotainment" (Bratton, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/30/we-need-to-talk-about-ted>>).

The format of the conferences and associated talks caught on in public discourse to such a degree that the moniker "TED talk," often capitalized, has turned into a recognizable label. The fact that TED talks have not only become immensely popular but also associated with a valorized way of presenting information can be seen in NPR's TED Radio Hour, a weekly nation-wide radio broadcast, the "Big Fat Ideas" talk series on iTunesU, and books such as Carmine Gallo's *Talk Like TED* (2014). High school and college teachers assign their students presentations, which are ostensibly modeled on TED talks (See Reck; see also Janzen). Lastly, the critical uptake of TED is in full swing, with multiple parodies using TED-inspired presentation templates, such as Bruce Feirstein and Walter Baumann's flowchart illustration for *Vanity Fair* entitled "Ted-O-Matic" (Feirstein, "The Art" 115), or fully-performed mock talks like the "Onion Talks."

It is only recently that academic writers have begun to discuss TED talks, mostly in regard to their potential to inspire new forms of teaching (See Romanelli, Cain, and McNamara; See also Nicolle, Britton, Janakiram, and Robichaud), as a more or less successful catalyst for social change (See Denskus and Esser), or as social-media phenomenon whose viewers and presenters can be analyzed using statistical methods (Sugimoto, Thelwall, Larivière, Tsou, Mongeon, and Benoit Macaluso; Tsou, Thelwall, Mongeon, and Sugimoto). All these articles mention TED's schematized nature and list select characteristics. Frank Romanelli, Jeff Cain, and Patrick McNamara, for example, observe that "TED Talks are not as unstructured as they may appear. Presenters are well coached and instructed to follow a specific presentation formula" ("Should Ted Talks" 1). Sugimoto, Thelwall, Larivière, Tsou, Mongeon, and Macaluso mention typical features such as "the use of satire, humor, and other forms of comedy," and the time constraint of eighteen minutes ("Scientists Popularizing Science" 2). Eileen Nicolle, Emanuelle Britton, Praseedha Janakiram, and Pierre-Marc Robichaud also note the eighteen-minute time limit as characteristic. In addition, they highlight the "live audience" whose presence is a key element in TED talks and the fact that presenters "talk passionately about their area of expertise" ("Using TED Talks" 777). Tsou, Thelwall, Mongeon, and Sugimoto discuss a thematic feature, namely the tendency of TED presenters to talk about "weighty," potentially world-changing issues, often with a science background ("A Community of Curious Souls" 4). They also mention that TED speakers are overwhelmingly male and that the talks fall "somewhere on a spectrum bookended by 'entertainment' and 'education'" (4). Denskus and Esser analyze TED talks on international development and evaluate the extent to which they promote long-lasting social change. The researchers consider TED a "mode of communication" ("Ted Talks on International Development" 2) which follows "a scripted logic" (8) and harkens back to entertainment elements from *American Idol* (19), with its elements of theater and surprise. Despite the general consensus among academics that TED talks are a genre, their generic nature is seldom studied in its own right. A notable exception is a study by Stefania D'Avanzo that analyzes the extent to which TED talks can be called "a new genre" ("Speaker Identity vs. Speaker Diversity" 281). D'Avanzo speaks about TED talks as a genre that arises through a process of "hybridization" (281). D'Avanzo's study is based on a large number of talks and evaluates them according to discursive elements such as hedges and boosters. While there is an overlap between D'Avanzo's findings and mine,

my analysis considers more specific parent genres and includes a range of discursive characteristics beyond the word level.

When I use "genre" here, I begin with the observation that a community has a label for a certain type of discourse; further, this labeling, together with the secondary uptake of the discourse (e.g. in pedagogical models and parodies), justifies the analysis. I point out that discursive features repeat across talks, together with associated similar settings, communication channels, speaker types, and interactions between speakers and interlocutors. With Richard Bauman, I thus see a "constellation of systemically related, co-occurring formal features and structures that serves as a conventionalized orienting framework for the production and reception of discourse" (3). Nevertheless, I am not proposing a formula of necessary and sufficient criteria, which identify a TED talk intrinsically even though, of course, recurring discursive features are important. I furthermore conceptualize TED talks as a practice, that is, as a discursive pattern through which speakers create and interpret the social world. Ultimately, context and genre are mutually constitutive, that is, a TED conference is a TED conference partly because people give a specific type of talk. I invoke what genres do for a community: they orient and conventionalize communication and they create the very stage upon which identity and community building takes place; they help, as Carolyn Miller writes, "virtual communities, the relationships we carry around in our heads, to reproduce and reconstruct themselves, to continue their stories" ("Rhetorical Community" 64).

With a frame that sees TED talks in their social functionality, this analysis asks: What are typical rhetorical features of TED talks? Which generic traditions can I detect? And how did the talks change over time? The first scholarly inquiries into TED conferences and talks show that they are a phenomenon worthy of academic scrutiny. What is missing is a fine-grained analysis of the generic characteristics together with their social indexicality. This case study aims at closing this gap by outlining the multiple characteristics of TED talks and analyzing them as a dynamic and composite genre.

I sampled TED talks from two broad periods, early talks and more recent ones, all of which I retrieved from YouTube. The watershed between these two phases is the beginning of the new millennium, and more precisely the launch of TED's online presence in 2006, which gave the filmed talks a previously unimaginable popularity. In order to get a grasp of the form of the premillennial talks I searched for the earliest talks available, three of which were recorded in 1984, 1990, and 1998 respectively. The analysis of the recent TED talks, on the other hand, is based on a selection of eleven talks which were available online on the TED page in November 2014. These are talks, which the TED organizers deem a "primer of 11 classic talks" and selected to answer the question: "What is TED?" The talks have been collected under the title "11 Must-see TED Talks." After my initial sampling, two new talks were added, Hugh Herr's "The New Bionics" and Alejandro Aravena's "My Architectural Philosophy? Bring the Community into the process" which substituted Bjarke Ingel's and Johnny Lee's talks (<[https://www.ted.com/playlists/77/11\\_must\\_see\\_ted\\_talks](https://www.ted.com/playlists/77/11_must_see_ted_talks)>). This title, as well as the accompanying illustration of a book entitled "TED 101," demonstrates the organizers' belief that those talks are representative of TED presentations at large. Table 1 shows my selection of talks.

Presenter	Title	Year
Nicholas Negroponte	"Five Predictions"	1984
Frank Gehry	"Defending a Vision for Architecture"	1990
Milton Glaser	"How Great Design Makes Ideas New"	1998
Chimamanda Adichie	"The Danger of a Single Story"	2009
Brené Brown	"The Power of Vulnerability"	2011
David Christian	"The History of our World in 18 Minutes"	2011
Amy Cuddy	"Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are"	2012
David Gallo	"Underwater Astonishments"	2007
Bjarke Ingels	"3 Warp-speed Architecture Tales"	2009
Johnny Lee	"Wii Remote Hacks"	2008
Sarah Kay	"If I Should Have a Daughter.."	2011
Sir Ken Robinson	"Do Schools Kill Creativity?"	2006
Hans Rosling	"The Best Stats You've Ever Seen"	2006
Bryan Stevenson	"We Need to Talk about an Injustice"	2012

Table 1. 14: Talks analyzed.

The method with which I analyzed these talks is mostly qualitative. I went through the fourteen videos and extracted reoccurring characteristics, which included characteristics of the speakers, the audience, as well as of the presentations' physical setting, and the visual support used. I then focused on the talks themselves and compared formal, thematic, rhetorical, and argumentative features. When in doubt about the wording, I checked the text with the help of the transcript, which TED provides for every uploaded talk. The only exception to this qualitative procedure was a statistical analysis of frequent words and concepts for which I used *AntConc*, a free concordance and frequency software.

With fourteen talks this sample is small. Consequently, I describe tendencies rather than necessary or sufficient criteria of what I call the TED talk genre. Nevertheless, this analysis is a starting point for a fruitful discussion about a wildly popular media phenomenon, its generic elements, and its socio-semiotic implications.

Nicholas Negroponte's "Five Predictions" (1984), Frank Gehry's "Defending a Vision for Architecture" (1990), and Milton Glaser's "How Great Design Makes Ideas New" (1998) are three early examples of TED talks which give us a feeling for the way TED talks were before they became a staple of popular discourse. Despite the fact that these are but three incidences, they still allow a glimpse into the infancy of TED talks. While the talks as we know them today have come a long way from these earlier manifestations, some features common today were already in place then. Among those stable features are the array of topics, the rhetorically upbeat mood of the presentations, as well as two rhetorical tools, namely anecdotes and humor. I briefly exemplify each of these features.

Negroponte, Gehry, and Glaser tackle subjects which still enjoy wide popularity today: technology and design. Negroponte talks about computer technology innovations he believes will change the way we work and learn; Gehry the architect presents a long list of his most original buildings together with reflections on how he arrived at new design ideas; and Glaser muses about how he built a career producing ever-new ideas in visual art, specifically poster design.

Another long-standing characteristic of TED talks is their enthusiastic and optimistic spirit. All three presenters, but most notably Negroponte, cast their talks as reports on groundbreaking innovations able to produce progress and inspiration. Hence, Negroponte predicts that his technology which will make dealing with a computer "more pleasurable" (0'20"; the information in parentheses is an approximate time marker in these videos), and recounts a heart-warming story of an allegedly mentally handicapped schoolboy who impressed senior school officials and Negroponte himself by teaching himself a computer language. Architect and designer Gehry, in turn, praises the benefits of involving nontraditional partners, such as craftsmen, in creative processes and thereby advocates a partnership ideology that is still resonant in many current talks. Graphic artist Glaser, lastly, emphasizes the positive force of failures, which led him to inspirations that made his posters "fresh" (10'25"); he also credits himself for "introduce[ing] the idea of doubt" (10'40"), of self-questioning, to graphic art.

Using anecdotes and humor is a third typical feature of TED talks, which was apparent from the very beginning. Negroponte tells the aforementioned anecdote about an allegedly illiterate child who surprised school officials by fluently reading a complicated tech manual (16'30"). Gehry relates a similar story of coincidence and surprise; in his case, he recounts an anecdote about his grandmother putting a fish into a bathtub. This tale was the inspiration for one of Gehry's fish sculptures, which in turn became the architect's hallmark in the following years (9'30"). Glaser, finally, describes how he and his wife drove by a garage sign, which gave him an idea about cultural stereotypes and rhetorical efficacy (3'40"). Humor is another essential rhetorical element in these early TED talks. Thus Negroponte explains the destruction of a technical device by saying that a "rather large person sat on it" (7'00"), Gehry jokes about turning on the stage light (1'00"), and Glaser produces a volley of funny cultural stereotypes about the previously mentioned garage sign (5'00"). Both rhetorical strategies, telling anecdotes and employing humor, add a tone of entertainment and informality to the presentations. Since new genres often arise from old ones, I seek to identify parent-elements or genre donors, which may have contributed to the new genre in a process of creative re-assembly. Assuming that Negroponte, Gehry, and Glaser's presentations were representative of early-stage TED talks, then this early form was a blend of three elements: a sales pitch, an educational communication, and aspects of a memoir.

What these early TED talks have in common with a sales pitch is, first, they are presented inspirationally and with the goal of convincing listeners of the assumptions as well as the trustworthiness and ingenuity of the presenter. Secondly, they pitch products, often technological innovations such as Negroponte's prototypes of touch screens. In contrast to traditional sales pitches, however, the "products" advertised are just as often ideational as material, much in line with TED's slogan "Ideas Worth Spreading." Thus, Negroponte implicitly advertises an optimistic attitude toward a technologized future and Gehry sends the tacit message that original minds are bound to succeed if only they follow their passion. In TED's own account, the attendees of the conferences came "from many different disciplines united by their curiosity and open-mindedness—and also by their shared discovery of an exciting secret (Back then, TED was an invitation-only event)" (<<https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization/history-of-ted>>). This description shows that the TED audience initially had a double nature: on the one hand it was a circle of exclusive guests getting a first peek at an exciting product or idea, but on the other hand it was much more than a pool of possible business partners and customers. Still, the business element of early and current TED talks lies in the persuasion, which is the main pragmatic tenant of each presenter.

Yet if TED talks present ideas as much as ready-made products, if they engage not just potential business partners, they have an educational undertone. This aspect is even more visible when we look at the way presenters give their talks: they stand elevated on a stage and monologize in front of their often sizable audiences. Hence, it is not surprising that TED talks have been compared to academic lectures (Romanelli, Cain, and McNamara, "Should TED Talks Be Teaching Us Something?" 1-3).

Finally, memoir can be seen as a generic foil of TED talks. Memoirs are life accounts written from a first-person point of view highlighting those moments, which exerted a formative influence on the writer's personality. The memoir aspect of these early TED talks is evident in the many personal stories and anecdotes, which the presenters share as well as in the already-mentioned uplifting spirit with which most talks end. If one looks at the talks not from the presenter's but from the audience's viewpoint, they are not only geared toward briefing the listeners about technological and artistic novelties, they also serve to familiarize the audience with the speakers' biographies and achievements.

Modern TED talks continue their forerunners' generic tradition, but they also add new aspects. The sales pitch is still palpable in the persuasive goal of modern TED talks as they aim to convince an



audience of the quality of a product, strategy, or idea. Johnny Lee, for example, pitches his strategies to hack a Wii remote control, Bjarke Ingels advertises his design ideas for buildings, and Amy Cuddy wants her audience to believe in the self-consciousness-enhancing effect of power posing. One could say that even though the audience may not be asked to buy an idea, it is asked to buy into an idea. Despite the fact that TED veterans like Becky Blanton urge prospective presenters to "tell and not sell" (<<http://sixminutes.dluqan.com/how-to-deliver-talk-life/>>). a premise also stated by several TEDx organizers (e.g. "Thou Shalt Not Sell from the Stage: Neither thv Company, thy Goods, thy Writings..." <<http://tedxgreensboro.com/about-ted/about-tedxgreensboro/>>), eloquence is still in the service of propagating a product or idea to the audience. Other elements, which enforce the sales character of TED talks are the topics which often center on innovation, design, and technology. Hence one can say that Bjarke Ingels advertises not only his design ideas for buildings, but also indirectly his architectural services. Examples from outside the 101 corpus of current TED talks are even more clearly idea- and product-oriented, such as Ricardo Semler's "How to Run a Company with (Almost) No Rules" or Sebastian Thrun's "Google's Driverless Car." The spirit of optimism and inspiration also resonates with a sales pitch where a salesperson links a product to some sort of betterment, for our personal lives or the world community. As Denskus and Esser note, many talks mention challenges together with solutions and end on an upbeat note (15). Cuddy, for example, finishes her talk by encouraging the audience to spread her insights about the benefits of body language and promises that "tiny tweaks can lead to big changes" (19'40"). Ken Robinson closes his talk with a similarly optimistic comment connecting his educational reform agenda to the TED project at large: "What TED celebrates," Robinson says, "is the gift of the human imagination" (18'30").

The much-discussed eighteen-to-twenty-minutes time limit for the talks is an element, which enhances the sales character of a TED presentation in its appeal to be short and sweet. As older talks show, this is a recent development; Gehry's talk, for instance, lasted more than twice as long. In fact, the limit has become one of the salient features of TED talks. Hence, the organizers define the genre as "short, powerful talks (eighteen minutes or less)" and TED's YouTube channel announce its podcasts as a format "where the world's leading thinkers and doers give the talk of their lives in 18 minutes" (e.g. Flake <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LT\\_x9s67yWA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LT_x9s67yWA)>). The expectation to present life-changing insights in less than twenty minutes is part of TED's appeal. David Christian plays with this challenge in his very title, "The Story of Our World in Eighteen Minutes" (<[https://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_christian\\_big\\_history](https://www.ted.com/talks/david_christian_big_history)>). TED curator Chris Anderson is often quoted as justifying the time limit as a means which enforces rhetorical efficacy and moreover aids online distribution: "It's the length of a coffee break. So, you watch a great talk, and forward the link to two or three people. It can go viral, very easily. The eighteen-minute length also works much like the way Twitter forces people to be disciplined in what they write" (<<http://www.tedxviadellaconciliazi one.com/about-ted/>>). Following Anderson, one interpretation of the brevity of talks is that TED organizers structure talks to fit decreased attention spans. In another, maybe even complimentary, interpretation the time limit also signals that the audience's time and attention are precious and should be respected.

Three more elements deepen the impression of attending a sales talk: the quality of visual support, the passionate delivery, and frequent use of the pronouns "we" and "us." With regard to the visual support, many presenters use appealing slides that are decorative and glossy to the point of resembling illustrations from an advertisement. Brené Brown, for example, illustrates her discussion of self-worth with a slide that shows the word "worthiness" over a highly-saturated, close-up photograph of glass hearts (7'20"). Another element resonating with a sales pitch is what, for lack of a better term, could be called a passionate style of delivery. The passion, enthusiasm, and excitement which presenters emanate are not only due to the words and concepts used, among them "passion" itself ("Can I believe in this this passionately?" Brown [19'30"]; "what you're passionate about" Kay [10'18]"). Paralinguistic features heighten this mood, such as when presenters speak quickly and breathlessly. Vivid modulation and sheer volume—some speakers like Cuddy even shout (19'00")—further index that speakers are emotionally involved in their projects and in the talks. On a more general level, TED presenters create an emotional atmosphere not only through the way they deliver their talks, but also through the content and the concepts they use. Emotionalized concepts appear in the form of negative and positive adjectives such as "excruciating" (Brown 4'15"), "amazing" (Gallo uses this word eight times in a five-minute talk); "extraordinary" alone appears four times in Robinson's presentation. Examples of positive nouns are "hope," "passion," and "power"; negative concepts are, for instance, "abuse," "degradation," and "marginalization" (all from Stevenson's talk). These emotionally-charged terms lend a melodramatic and declamatory note to many talks. The emotional and passionate quality of TED talks signal to the audience that the presenters genuinely care. This emotional appeal fits both the sales tradition of TED talks as well as that of memoir.

Another sales-talks-like characteristic also works on the word level: TED talks are brimming with first-person plural pronouns. In the eleven modern talks of my corpus, "we" is the fifth-most common item. A good example comes from Robinson's closing in which he cautions that, "We have to be careful now that we use this gift [of the human imagination] wisely, and that we avert some of the scenarios that we've talked about" (18'45"). By employing first-person plural pronouns, speakers establish a common ground with the audience; they make their talks both intimate and inclusive. Finally, the fact that nearly all talks are memorized makes them akin to carefully prepared sales pitches. This similarity with business talks is not surprising, given the fact that TED emerged from Silicon Valley.

The academic or educational connotation of TED talks has increased because many presenters are university-based researchers who speak about their scholarly expertise. Among the eleven TED presenters in my sample are two social scientists (Brown and Cuddy), one former professor of education (Robinson), one historian (Christian), and one oceanographer (Gallo). Academic experts

account for about a quarter of all presenters (See Sugimoto, Thelwall, Larivière, Tsou, Mongeon, and Macaluso). What further supports TED's academic impression is that many speakers use authentication known from academia, such as visual support in the form of infographics or even sophisticated animations (e.g. in Hans Rosling's presentation). Speakers also mention how a certain phenomenon resonates with "recent studies" as in "Recent studies by satellites [...] have shown that..." (Christian, (<[https://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_christian\\_big\\_history](https://www.ted.com/talks/david_christian_big_history)>, 5'45"). Behind this gesture lies the wish to legitimize arguments with academically-accepted means. Finally, the fact that TEDx events are often hosted on campuses of higher education institutions shows that faculty and students see it as their calling to reinforce the university as a center of knowledge production. This ties in with Sugimoto and Thelwall's finding that academics start using TED talks as web sources on their syllabi; academic lectures are a foil of comparison for Romanelli, Cain, and McNamara, and Nicolle Britton, Janakiram, and Robichaud as well. Even though both research teams highlight the differences between TED talks and academic lectures, the very fact that they compare these two formats speaks to similar genres.

Beside the sales pitch and the academic lecture, memoir is a third genre component I detect in both current and the three early talks. Self-actualization or the coming into one's own, and the implicit inspiration it effects in the listeners are key elements in many talks which often are condensed into tales of wishes, failure, and eventual success. Thus, Brown recounts her long struggle with insecurity and her eventual acceptance and even academic success with it. Sharing with the audience a formative moment can take on a confessional tone as when Stevenson, for example, confides: "And I'm going to admit something to you. I'm going to tell you something I probably shouldn't. I know this might be broadcast broadly. But I'm 52 years old, and I'm going to admit to you that I've never had a drop of alcohol. (Applause)" (<[https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan\\_stevenson\\_we\\_need\\_to\\_talk\\_about\\_an\\_injustice](https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice)>, 5'00"). A related phenomenon is that these memoir snippets sometimes reach into the melodramatic, either in terms of the content related—discussing, for instance, issues of poverty and neglect, but also stories of individual trial and triumph—and/or in the way the speakers present them. It is not uncommon to witness speakers tearing up during their presentations, as in Amy Cuddy's talk (18'20"). Indexing humility, vulnerability, and emotionality are crucial parameters for TED talks. Humility sometimes takes the shape of self-mockery and self-irony. Hence, Kay calls herself "pretty damn naïve" (<[https://www.ted.com/talks/sarah\\_kay\\_if\\_i\\_should\\_have\\_a\\_daughter?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/sarah_kay_if_i_should_have_a_daughter?language=en)>, 2'50") and Brown mentions that an impasse in her research "led to a little breakdown" (<[https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en)>, 11'15"). This fits the organizers' advice to prospective candidates to display "honest, contagious emotions—wonder, optimism, anger, surprise, etc." (<<https://www.ted.com/participate/organize-a-local-tedx-event/tedx-organizer-guide/speakers-program/prepare-your-speaker/outline-script>>), and successful presenter Betty Blanton recommends to "Be authentic-vulnerable" (<<http://sixminutes.dlugan.com/how-to-deliver-talk-life/>>). The rhetorical goal of these strategies is probably to create an atmosphere of intimacy and authenticity, maybe even a symbolic flattening of the difference between audience and speaker, who may appear distant due to expertise, success, confidence, and fame. Still, one can argue that this vulnerability is part of a staged character since few speakers actually appear shy or vulnerable.

TED talks also resemble memoirs in their typical argumentative structure. Many talks move from a concrete, even tiny aspect of a given theme to ever-larger implications. Thus, Brown opens with an anecdote about her insecurity regarding how she categorizes herself professionally. Then she moves on to her research on vulnerability and ends at showing how vulnerability has implications for politics and culture in general. Similarly, Stevenson's talk leads from a personal anecdote about his grandmother to the "power of identity" and culminates in a call-to-action against criminal injustice. Denskus and Esser call this argumentative zooming-out from the "micro to the macro scale" ("TED Talks on International Development" 11). Romanelli, Cain, and McNamara also observe a move from ideas to their larger implications when they note that TED talks often involve a "relatable example or intriguing idea." and spell out "how the idea could affect the audience" ("Should TED Talks Be Teaching Us Something?" 2). This micro-to-macro argumentation fits a memoir pattern in which individual fates become part of a bigger, possibly historic picture. Lastly, many TED talks show similarities with memoirs in that they have a literary quality, that is, leaving a polished and poetic impression. This literariness is evident in the melodramatic narrative as well as in the rhetorical strategies many TED presenters use. Romanelli, Cain, and McNamara already observe that TED talks are often presented in a "storyboarding" or "storytelling mode" (1,2). This quality comes from a carefully crafted narrative, which uses moments of suspense and surprise for maximal rhetorical impact. Chimamanda Adichie, for instance, relates how she became an independent African author by writing against a single, stereotyping perspective, but admits as her pivotal moment that she herself fell victim to this simplistic thinking (<[https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?language=de](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=de)>, 8'20"). With their mixture of professional and private, even intimate elements, TED talks blur spheres which are typically kept separate in official or academic talks. Yet this is precisely what makes TED talks special and accounts for their connotation of self-help philosophies.

Poetic figures such as repetitions and parallelisms appear frequently in TED talks. Adichie, for instance, uses a parallel structure when she asks "So what if before my Mexican trip I had followed the immigration debate... What if my mother had told us that... What if we had an African television network..." (14'05"). Figurative speech can be seen, for example, in the form of personifications; hence Christian envisions "atoms [that] cruise [and] cuddle" (<[https://www.ted.com/talks/david\\_christian\\_big\\_history](https://www.ted.com/talks/david_christian_big_history)>). Another rhetorical device are rhetorical questions. Thus, Robinson seeks the audience's rhetorical approval by asking "Am I right?" (5'30") and Brown wonders "Is there something about me...?" (4'50"). These rhetorical figures bestow upon many TED talks a polished and sometimes

poetic feel and contribute to the impression of a finely composed story. In sum, TED talks resemble memoirs in that they often relate a life-story, familiarize the audience with a speaker's personality, and do so with a near-literary form.

I argue that TED talks today evolved from its forerunners through a process that can be called performativization or theatricalization. That is to say, recent TED talks are highly professional, one-person stunts, which are meant to entertain and inform and thus are similar to media formats known as "infotainment" or "edutainment." No wonder that Heller remarks about one talk that "as performance, though, it was delightful" (Heller, "Listen" <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/09/listen-and-learn>>). The earlier talks had been interesting thematically, yet not very exciting in terms of how presenters delivered them. Now, almost all TED talks are perfectly designed "knowledge snacks" whose delivery is as important as their content. The elements, which contribute to this air of performance and entertainment are the already mentioned time limit of twenty minutes, the informal register, as well as the venue and stage-setting.

In interesting contrast with the formal and polished component of most TED talks, presenters often use an informal register. They employ contractions (Adichie: "I've laughed every time I've read this" 7'04"), and swearwords (Brown, "B.S. meters" 12'30"). Informal expressions also appear, for example, when Kay uses the relativizing adverb "pretty" in "pretty damn naïve" (2'50"), or when Brown recounts a reaction with the casual citation formula "I was like" (0'55"). Informal pronouns like the plural "you guys" are also common (e.g. Lee 1'50"). What further contributes to the impression of informality is the foregrounding of both the speaker and the audience by means of first- and second-person pronouns. Among the most frequently used words are "I" (ranking fifth in the *AntConc* results), "you" (ninth), and "we" (tenth). Using these pronouns does not have to be a sign of informality. But it contributes to the atmosphere of intimacy between the interlocutors. This foregrounding of speakers and listeners presents a decisive contrast with academic presentations which tend to be self-effacing. Hence, TED presenters take pains not to appear as academic lecturers who are often perceived as aloof. Focusing on the audience as "you" rhetorically highlights the presence of the audience and it does so on an almost-universal level, particularly when the audience and speaker appear as a collective "we," as in Stevenson's talk: "Ultimately, you judge the character of a society [...] by how they treat the poor, the condemned, the incarcerated. Because it's in that nexus, that we actually begin to understand truly profound things about who we are" (16'35").

By rhetorically stressing speakers, participants, and the connection between them, TED talks create a moment of collectivity, which, coupled with an often-informal tone, invokes a bonding experience among a group of strangers (in "Behind the TED Talk" writer and TED presenter Elizabeth Gilbert calls the talks an "extremely intimate encounter where you're sharing something to this darkened room" [1'40"]). TED talks thus become communal events where listeners and presenters are ritually turned into peers. This contrast between informality and poetic pathos is an essential part of TED's rhetorical charm. While the speaker presents a relaxed and spontaneous face, the audience can be sure to see a perfectly orchestrated talk in which no relaxedness or spontaneity threatens their entertainment.

It emphasizes the performance character of many TED talks that signs of attention and appreciation are keenly monitored and kept on footage and that audience sitting area is not fully darkened—arguably to highlight these reactions for the video consumers. The criterion of successful entertainment is the immediate feedback from the audience in the form of laughter or (standing) ovations as well as "clicks" and "likes" among the virtual audience. The fact that most talks are memorized fits well with the impression of performative sleekness many talks possess. As opposed to earlier talks in which technical and rhetorical glitches seemed acceptable (visual support not working, stammering, pauses), more recent talks are polished and edited to rhetorical perfection.

In addition to the content and delivery of TED talks, they resemble performances as they are videotaped and edited indicating that talks are worthy of recording and (re-)distribution. This mediatization is crucial, because the anticipation of being filmed encourages presenters to tailor their talks into professional, entertaining, and audience-oriented "gigs." How seriously the TED organizers take these secondary representations of their conferences is evident in the fact that in 2005, they hired Jason Wishnow, a professional filmmaker who gave the videos a substantial make-over and infused the event with a "spirit of a live rock concert" (Heller, "Listen" <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/09/listen-and-learn>>). Wishnow specifically comments on the emotional effects he achieved through the "language of cinema," including "tight shots for sensitive moments" (Heller, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/09/listen-and-learn>>). While the videos may have arisen for purposes of internal documentation, they have turned a pillar of the TED endeavor.

In general, the audience is vital to TED events, and the organizers make sure to foreground the audience's presence and reactions in the videos. Many speakers encourage the audience to show their reactions in certain invited moments, by provoking laughter and initiating audience activities (on the role of laughter, see also Heller's account (<<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/07/09/listen-and-learn>>)). Thus Cuddy asks the audience at the end of her presentation to try power-posing. Frenetic clapping and standing ovations are other important elements. In capturing positive reception signals like laughing or applause, the organizers present the talks as truly interactive and engaging events.

The sophisticated stage decoration on major events is another element that creates a feeling of a theatrical performance. The organizers decorate the stage with an eclectic variety of props such as bookcases, musical and technical instruments, desks, or statues. These props sometimes amount to the imitation of a Faustian study cabinet, bespeaking the organizers' wish to surround TED talks with an atmosphere of erudition which harkens back to the presumed academic nature of many talks. These decorations also give TED stages the air of an actual theatre stage or film studio in which a live show happens, even though presenters rarely use these props. In contrast to the mother conventions,



smaller TEDx conferences lack these elaborate stage props, possibly due to financial restrictions. However, every TEDx stage will feature a big, three dimensional TED sign which unites all TED events under one corporate symbol. Hence, the entertainment takes place in a branded space.

Taking all observations into account, I suggest the following trajectory of TED talks' evolution: The talks began as a form of internal communication in which an idea or a product reached a new, yet professionally affiliated audience in the frame of a local conference. In the beginning, the talks were varied, but could be seen as a hybrid of sales pitch and educational presentation with the latter part being secondary. From the start, the talks featured a personal touch which they may have owed to the relative intimacy of the conference or the close connection between the products and their inventors. This nexus between the presenter and the presented was an appealing innovation of both educational and business talks and grew stronger in recent years. As TED conferences became regular events, participant numbers increased and individually organized TEDx conferences mushroomed. Hence, more people were exposed to the TED talk as a format and the talks became the conferences' figurehead—at once the central rhetorical act of the conferences and a potent advertising tool.

It was certainly a decisive moment when in 2006, TED launched its website and uploaded videos because with this move the talks became much more visible. As huge numbers of people came to know the format and expressed their appreciation through likes and clicks, this affirmed the talks' most successful blueprints and turned them into "symbolic currency," in Denskus and Esser's terms ("TED Talks on International Development" 17). In TED talks, we might have seen a mutually reinforcing feedback loop in which a form is generified to a certain extent, then reaches a new audience and from there generifies further. Another accelerating factor must have been the increasing number of private weblogs which are now a major distribution node for the talks. TED talks are highly sharable items which easily snowball in the virtual community's click-and-share economy. One might argue that TED talks crystallized into a genre due to two parallel developments: first, they became a valuable symbolic good in their primary setting of the conference, and second, altered modes of distribution gave the talks a new audience and a rhetorical echo that enhanced the inherent genre disposition.

Even though TED talks are a relatively young format, they have changed over time. Despite the fact that rhetorical characteristics, presenters, and the audience of recent talks still bear witness to the origins of TED in the Silicon Valley community of innovators and entrepreneurs, the talks also conquered new ground, both in terms of their target audience and their generic make-up. The most important change is that TED talks have moved away from presentations with glitches and have turned into highly-prepared, perfectly-delivered oral performances. These changes are likely to be the effect of internal drift and routinization, but they also reflect new modes of distribution and new audiences.

It seems fair to say that TED talks by now are frequently perceived as a type of presentation that has become a known, sometimes mocked, but often reproduced genre. Categorizing TED talks as a genre helps us not only describe them, but also allows us to see them as embedded socio-semiotic events: thus, we can analyze the social surroundings and the audience they attract (and recreate), and how they perform the rhetorical action of informing, entertaining, and building group-consciousness, and the wider sociocultural trends they tap, such as social activism and online education. As a pedagogical and rhetorical template, they have already reached academia. It's time to tackle them as a socio-discursive phenomenon in their own right.

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