

TED 2012 - a story worth telling?

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Everyone in LA has a story to tell and TED's is more interesting than most.

It has grown from a niche conference on the themes of Technology, Entertainment and Design to a global brand.

Since 2006 it has been streaming its 18-minute talks online, it has opened up the conference globally, allowing an army of volunteers to run their own TED events around the world and this year it will be expanding its brand into the world of education with the soon-to-be-launched TED ED.



One of this year's most popular speakers was Scooter from the Muppets

But at its heart it remains a conference dedicated to the stories told on stage: 18 minutes of insight into a range of topics which it hopes will offer world-changing solutions to some of the biggest global problems.

But with its cultish status comes pressure to deliver even more original, inspiring stories and that special TED moment that will wow the TEDsters, as delegates are known.

Prison injustice

This year the theme of the conference is Full Spectrum, which curator Chris Anderson explains refers both to tackling the full spectrum of ideas and extending talks beyond words to add an extra dimension.

Some did it with video - scientist Brian Greene with extraordinary graphics to accompany his talk about the possibility of multiple universes or poet Billy Collins with animations to sit alongside his moving poetry.

Others did it more simply, such as Susan Cain who brought with her a suitcase of books to illustrate her plea for introverts to be given equal status with extroverts.

And lawyer Bryan Stevenson used no props at all in his 18-minute speech about the work he does with the poor and those unfairly put in jail.

His moving talk provided this year's TED moment for many and he received the longest and most impassioned standing ovation of all the speakers.



The theme of this year's TED was Full Spectrum, interpreted in many different ways

Mr Anderson admitted that his "heart was still beating" after the speech as "a room full of people leapt to their feet because a serious injustice had been identified".

Muppet politics

As well as pulling on the heart strings, TED is also home to crazy ideas.

So the audience, which pays \$7,500 (£4,730; 5,680 euro) for a ticket, found themselves listening to Muppet member Scooter making a plea for puppets in the digital age.

Describing TED as "an Academy Awards for nerds" he said there needed to be space for "tactile icons" in an age of CGI. It was a case of "felt versus formulas", he said.

TED also gave a platform to the work of new fellow Gabriel Barcia-Colombo, an interactive video artist whose work includes trapping miniature 1950s housewives inside a blender and capturing his friends in jars. "People tend to hide from me," he admitted.

Or a TED fan who finally realized his dream to get a much sought-after slot on the TED stage - via a crowd-sourced talk and an unusual companion.

Lior Zoref called on his Facebook friends to come up with the key themes of his talk and he also clocked up a TED first by bringing an ox onto the stage to illustrate the power of crowd wisdom.



Lior Zoref shared the stage with an Ox

He invited the audience to guess its weight. About 500 people responded and the average turned out to be just 3lb (1.4kg) short of the animal's real weight.

Mr Zoref is the first of a new breed of TED speaker, selected by audition. This year just two speakers were selected this way but the non-profit organization plans to hold open auditions in 14 countries around the world to find "amazing people that we wouldn't normally come across" for TED 2013.

Turn off

Technology still features high on the agenda. From the cutting-edge prototype liquid metal battery that promises to revolutionize renewable energy to a talk calling for us to turn off our devices and have more conversations.

Cultural analyst Sherry Turkle painted a familiar picture of families living together but not connecting because each was engrossed in their own email, text or social network.

"We are letting technology take us places we don't want to go. People text during corporate board meetings, parents text during breakfast, people even text at funerals," she said.

"We are setting ourselves up for trouble in how we relate to each other. People can't get enough of each other but only at a distance. Human relationships are rich and messy and we are clearing them up with technology," she said.



Prof Don Sadoway turned to low-tech to explain his revolutionary battery

She called for a return to "real-time conversation that we can't control".

Her plea resonated with audience, only some of whom took surreptitious glances at their mobiles during her talk.

It illustrates one of the contradictions of TED, an audience who will cheer people with passionate tales to tell about changing the world and then go back to running their million dollar companies during the lunch break.

Partly to bring fresh blood to the conference, and offer places to those who would not be able to afford the ticket price, TED created its Fellows programme in 2009.

It is made up of young people with real-world ideas that are making a difference to lives, such as Myshkin Ingawale with his low-cost, non-invasive test for anaemia.

Past fellows include open-source mapping platform Ushahidi's Erik Hersman and Perry Chen, the founder of crowd-funded arts project KickStarter.

Future city

TED remains committed to ideas, so much so that this year is awarded a prize to one.

Each year the organization offers \$100,000 to individuals with an idea to change the world. Past recipients include extraterrestrial hunter Jill Tarter and the UK's own chef-on-a-mission Jamie Oliver.

But the 2012 prize has gone not to an individual but to an idea - City 2.0.

To make it concrete, TED has created website TheCity2.org, a collaborative platform to allow citizens to connect and share ideas about how future cities should look.



This year the TED prize went to City 2.0

The \$100,000 will be shared between 10 projects identified as most likely to bring about such a city. The winners will be announced at TEDGlobal in June.



Mr Anderson admits that TED is no longer just about technology, entertainment and design or about the two conferences it runs yearly in LA and Edinburgh.

He wants to steer away from issues such as the global economy, which the mainstream media have "done to death".

"Politicians come and go but ideas last for ever. There are numerous things talked about that will have massive global impact," he said.

He said that, as curator, he is always on the lookout for new ways to do things, but one thing will stay constant.

"The world remains in desperate need of good ideas. We won't ever run out of things to say."