

TED speakers are filmed with multiple cameras and edited exactly. Online, they've had more than eight hundred million views.

LISTEN AND LEARN

TED Talks reach millions around the world. How has a conference turned ideas into an industry?

BY NATHAN HELLER

I'd like to begin with a story. On a bright late-February afternoon, in Long Beach, California, Lior Zoref, an Israeli Ph.D. student, climbed onstage to rehearse what he called "the talk of my life." It was the second full day of the TED ideas conference, and in the lobby outside the theatre doors more than a thousand men and women milled and gammed and ate lunch in the winter sun. Zoref was nervous. He had spent the past few months preparing with an athlete's focus for a talk of fourteen minutes. While the presentations that he usually gave were functional and evanescent, this one had to be a virtuosic feat, a summa of his work to date. "I've been practicing like I've never practiced," Zoref had told me earlier, not long after touching down in California. (He and his wife had allowed themselves two days' respite in New York, on a layover from Tel Aviv, and caught "The Book of Mormon," on Broadway.) Now, with an hour left until his lecture, he was concentrating on minutiae and grace: the slow, assured sweep of his gaze across the audience; the way he strode across the stage; the timing of a joke. Everything else was muscle memory. By the time Zoref arrived in town, he said, he'd given his TED talk—to friends, to students, to his nonverbal one-year-old son, to anybody, really, who'd listen—more than four hundred times.

Long Beach is a marina town, a place where the Pacific Coast Highway hiccups inland and the tallest buildings crowd down to the waterfront. On the morning of Zoref's talk, this downtown corridor was dense with traffic, and the Long Beach Performing Arts Center—a squat, big-windowed building by the harbor—thrummed with discussion of the day's events. The engineering professor Vijay Kumar had previously demonstrated his coordinated swarming robots. T. Boone Pickens advocated shifting our dependency from oil to natural gas. Zoref, whose

graduate work focusses on collective cognition and social networks, saw his appearance in this company as an arrival. Last April, he had signed up for the conference's first public auditions, promising a crowd-sourced talk, on the idea that a group of networked minds can shape a better product than an individual imagination. After putting out the word on Twitter, Facebook, and his blog ("Ideas for other questions or subjects I should address?"), he'd received suggestions from hundreds of people. Of these, the gambit of which he was proudest was the only part of the talk he hadn't yet rehearsed: a moment when he'd step aside and call onstage a giant ox.

"It's huge," he exclaimed now, as the creature appeared for the first time. The ox was black, sleek, muscular; when it plodded into the spotlight, under the guidance of a wrangler, the stage crew and other rehearsing performers shifted tensely, as if each motion might mark the start of a faena. Cameron Carpenter, an organ virtuoso performing that afternoon, peered at the animal from a generous distance. "It's going to gore us all," he murmured.

"Is it sedated?" someone asked.

The wrangler shook his head. Zoref moved in close, pushing his brow into the ox's face. He is a thickly built guy, with an air of willed eagerness, and when he gets excited, which happens a lot, his speech climbs to a zinging falsetto, as if voicing an invisible Muppet. "Hello, Teddy!" he cooed into the animal's left eye. "Yes, *hello!*" The ox blinked.

TED—a four-day conference of research lectures, technology demonstrations, arts performances, and self-described world-changing ideas—has become in recent years a showroom for the intellectual style of the digital age. An open secret of a conference when it began, almost three decades ago, it is today home to one of the fastest-

growing, best-educated, and wealthiest creative communities in America. (Admission to the Long Beach conference starts at seventy-five hundred dollars, not including the hotel; tickets are available by invitation, or through an application that includes both essays and references.) And, although "TED" stands for Technology/Entertainment/Design, the conferences have recently skewed toward the first part of the triptych. If you have a surprising notion about how business works, how Third World hunger works, how the mind works, or how technology ought to work, it may be TED-worthy. If you have fresh ideas about Second Empire urbanization, or Richard Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park" series, you're best off parking your tweeds elsewhere. TED is now based in New York, where it occupies a sleek, beanbag-chair-laden office, but it remains spiritually centered on the California coast, nearer Stanford's labs and the cafés of Valencia Street—even as its influence grows to extend past that world.

People who know TED these days frequently know it best from "TED Talks," a series of Internet lecture videos that has received more than eight hundred million views to date. (That's nearly two-thirds the number of movie tickets sold last year in all of North America.) Yet its style and substance have begun to overtake other media, too. To feed a market for "ideas" which it has helped create, the organization has launched an e-book imprint and an e-reader app to accompany it. You can watch TED lectures on your seat-back screen as you fly cross-country, or listen to excerpts in your car as they air on NPR.

Abroad, TED spreads through what used to be called soft power. "TEDx" events—essentially, do-it-yourself TED conferences, produced by volunteers—run at a global rate of about five per day, in a hundred and thirty-three countries. (Lara



“The problem is that your trap is one big macaroni.”

Stein, who runs the program, noted, “We’ve had a TEDx event with six hundred people on a floating hotel in the middle of the Amazon forest with seven high-definition cameras.”) Ambitious young people worldwide can apply to be “TED Fellows,” and join a weeklong residency program at the mothership conferences as they launch their entrepreneurial careers. Or they can stay home and watch TED Talks subtitled into eighty-eight languages by a worldwide corps of volunteers.

Shortly before Zoref was to speak that day, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had called him to wish him luck—an extra notch of pressure on an already carefully calibrated talk. Studying past lectures, Zoref had noticed that several shared an “Aha!” moment: a turn of visceral surprise that drove home the talk’s concepts. In 2008, Jill Bolte Taylor, a cognitive researcher who narrated the story of her own stroke, had produced a real human brain to talk about cerebral anatomy. In 2009, Bill Gates had released a jar of mosquitoes to make a point about malarial risk. The ox, whose weight Zoref would ask the audience to guess, was his bid to join in this tradition, to deliver his

ideas in a way the audience would be unable to forget.

At 2:09 P.M., the “Marcia Trionfale” from “Aida,” which heralds the start of each TED session, echoed through the complex, and an audience began to collect outside the theatre doors. The program started. Carpenter, the organist, launched into an arrangement of Richard Rodgers’s “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue.” Reid Hoffman, who co-founded LinkedIn, discussed flexibility in career paths. Then the venture-capitalist David Hornik gave a short, charming talk about how his dyslexia makes him forget everyone’s name, and Zoref left his chair to lean against the base of the stage.

His name was called. He bounded up. He took his place on a circle of red carpet. The orchestra seats were faintly lit from above—an eerie blue, to make the audience show up on video. Zoref’s face was already being broadcast live to screens throughout the Long Beach complex; to Palm Springs, California, where TED staffers were holding a ticketed shadow event; and to more than a hundred and sixty other conferences around the world, whose organizers and translators had brokered a live feed of

the Long Beach stage. The applause died down. Zoref was holding a slide clicker in one hand. “I have a question,” he said. “Do you have a dream?”

American culture rides forward on stories about sudden fame and bold ascent—the singer who invents a new style of celebrity, the unknown actor rising with a quirky TV show, the kid who shapes a generation’s online habits from his dorm room. TED is a display case for such stories and, increasingly, the subject of them; the conference has grown famous for making its speakers famous, even as it claims to tread above the rough clod of celebrity. TED has been criticized for these tendencies. And yet the criticism, like the admiration, has never addressed the mystery of the talks’ success: why TED has grown so exceptionally popular, and so quickly.

The answer may have something to do with the conference’s rituals of preparation. Soon after arriving in Long Beach, I met Susan Cain, who was scheduled to speak about the subject of her first book, “Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking.” Cain is a friendly woman with a soft, clipped verbal style. In the week before TED, she’d been working with an acting coach to perfect the rhythm of her talk—a measure beyond the pale of normal preparation, since all aspects of the conference are already shaped to make the ideas being presented fit for popular consumption.

Ordinarily, TED’s closely governed editorial process begins with the concept: the conference’s “curators” feel out a speaker’s interests, looking for material that’s new and counterintuitive. They think about form. A TED talk tends to follow one of several narrative arcs (some have three acts, others are cast as detective stories, others are polemics), and curating is about creating a mix of styles as much as it’s about shaping each lecture. Vetting follows. In the run-up to a presentation, key facts may be spot-checked. Allusions, metaphors, jargon, jokes—anything that might appeal to an audience of coastal Californians but leave online viewers in Lebanon baffled—are often flagged and cut, a process that can bleach lectures to an odd cultural beige. (TED is generally aligned with mainstream left-of-center views, but any pol-

icy positions it leans toward tend to be framed in terms of broad and undeniable goods: education, environmental sustainability, equal rights.) The real work of the curators, though, often comes down to emotional shading. When Cain first drafted her talk, it was thick with statistics and case-making data. Looking at other TED lectures, though, she decided to replace some of her data points with stories—an inclination that the conference’s curators pushed even further. A moving narrative about her grandfather’s bookish introversion now concluded the lecture. “I’ve had to stifle my appetite for nuance,” she said, about the lost statistics.

In the days or hours before a Long Beach talk is delivered, it gets a final polish from Chris Anderson, TED’s head curator, or June Cohen, who runs TED Media. The polish consists largely of a speaker running over key passages on-stage while Anderson or Cohen sits in the front row and laughs uproariously at the jokes. When Cain went through this process—it was early in the morning, and Cohen was slumped back in her seat, clutching an enormous paper cup of coffee and guffawing in an otherwise impassive room—I assumed it was essentially a confidence-boosting exercise, part of the general cloud of cheerleading that TED exudes like a Shalini perfume. It wasn’t until Cain presented for real that I realized something else had been going on. The moments when Cohen had laughed were, almost to a one, the moments when the audience laughed. Cohen had been pacing the talk, forecasting the way that Cain’s gestures, punch lines, and revelations would play against the energy of a large crowd. And she hit the mark. Soon after Cain spoke, she discovered that her name was the sixth-most-trending phrase on Twitter in the world. When her lecture later went up on TED.com, it received about half a million views in its first day.

One morning, I met Bruno Giussani, TED’s European director, for breakfast in the Palm Court of the Plaza Hotel, where he was staying after flying into New York for a party. Giussani is a warm, watchful man with Steve Martin hair and a doughy Italian accent. He worked for years as a journalist, mostly from Switzerland, where he still lives,

before joining TED, in 2005. These days, his chief responsibility is organizing the yearly TED Global conference, which ran last week, in Edinburgh.

“I used to say, ‘One of the things that makes a magazine great is what you put in, but also what you leave out,’” Giussani told me, stirring artificial sweetener into his coffee. “Some ideas, compressed into four minutes, don’t have enough time to develop. Some others, for eighteen minutes”—the upper limit at TED—“just feel dragged out.” Pressure is built into the process. There are no simultaneous events at TED, so speakers can’t hide behind the premise of a self-selecting audience. The pressure tends to drive them beyond the fourth wall, into their viewers’ arms. “The personal element often comes in, because it’s what makes the speaker a bit vulnerable in front of the audience,” Giussani explained. “It’s what makes them authentic.”

Giussani and I were just starting breakfast when a man with a trim beard and a striped velour jacket sidled up to

the table. He had met Giussani at the previous night’s party. He reintroduced himself and immediately started toying with the silverware.

“I have to tell you something,” he said. “I’m a mentalist.” He pointed to a spoon. “Do you see that spoon?” He balanced it on a saltshaker. “I’m just going to see if I can move it.”

With his hands, the man made a loose, throbbing gesture, as if conducting a miniature orchestra. The spoon spun crazily around. We murmured our surprise. Snatching up the spoon again, he grasped its base between the fingers of one hand. “I just want to tell you—watch.” He flashed the five fingers of his free hand, and the silver wilted forward, like a bar of chocolate over a flame. An elderly Northern European couple at an adjoining table gasped. The man offered the bent spoon to Giussani, and then abruptly walked away. A few weeks later, Giussani told me he’d booked the silverware torturer—Gerard Senehi, a self-described “mentalist and



“The only ghosts you need fear are the ghosts of your past—which will gnaw away at your soul, riddle you with self-doubt, and ultimately sap you of your will to live.”

activist”—as a speaker for the upcoming TED Global.

TED's eye for theatre, its vigilance about immersion and control, has become a key source of its appeal. Attendees are urged not to check their phones during the talks. Volunteers who want to organize a TEDx event receive a hundred-and-thirty-six-page manual detailing regulations and requirements—advisories like “Webcast archives of TEDx events are not permitted” and “The name of your event should always align left in relation to the ‘TEDx’ part of the logo.” Conferences that overstep major rules lose their TED license. “We always hear about it,” Lara Stein says.

This tight control sits awkwardly with TED's promises of intellectual exchange. The most famous flap in TED's history came in 2010, when the comedian Sarah Silverman launched an onstage riff about wanting to adopt a “retarded” child—in particular, one with a terminal illness, so she wouldn't have to care for it past the age when children ought to be autonomous. It was the satire for which Silverman is known, pushing a popular trope of do-goodism and right-think so far that it grows offensive and absurd. And it divided the Long Beach audience. In a personal tweet, Anderson called Silverman's routine “god-awful.” Even now, there's no Silverman talk on TED.com.

Critics—such as Nassim Nicholas Taleb, who famously likened TED speakers to “low-level entertainers”—tend to regard TED as a rogue force of idiocy, chasing ideas with a meat grinder while serious thinkers chew their leafy greens. But the conference's numbers are its best defense. Why speak rigorously to an audience of hundreds when you can ham it up a bit and spread the fruits of your research to millions? Why charge a reasonable rate if you can demand an exorbitant one (Long Beach always sells out, even with the four-figure admission fee) and use the cash to make your videos available for free and to fund developing-world programs like TED Fellows? Arguments against the conference's approach have a way of seeming absurdly parochial.

People frequently say that TED has a low irony quotient. Actually, there is plenty of irony at TED; what's missing is a particular kind of irony, the underdog kind. TED's sensibility reflects a West

Coast mood, one that becomes palpable down near Big Sur, where the light changes from the buttery subtropical glaze of Southern California to something cooler and more filtered, where people start calling the Pacific Coast Highway by the simpler name of Highway 1. It is the mood of professionals who wear Converse to work, own multimillion-dollar homes at thirty-two, eat local, donate profits to charity, learn Mandarin, and rock-climb in the Pinnacles on Sundays. It is the friendly, self-effacing irony of winners. There is a joke around the TED offices which distills this West Coast irony for me. It goes, “Oh, so you've lost your legs and climbed Everest? So did everyone else.”

I first heard that joke from June Cohen, a spark plug of a woman with bright-blue eyes, curly dark hair, and the exuberant nerviness of a student who has just emerged from a final exam after a night guzzling coffee in the science library. Cohen didn't expect to end up in the conference game. As an undergraduate, she was the editor-in-chief of the *Stanford Daily*. One night, she was out for drinks with a few other editors when somebody dropped a copy of *MacWeek* on the table. The big tech story was the release of Apple's video player QuickTime. If text could be read on a computer and video could be watched on a computer, Cohen thought, why not combine those two journalistic forms in one space? As the drinks piled up, she and her *Daily* colleagues turned over the idea. “We started drawing on a cocktail napkin—like, what would it mean if we could create a computer-based supplement?” she said. “Maybe you could combine the immediacy of broadcast journalism with the in-depth reporting of print news.”

It was 1991. The multimedia World Wide Web hadn't established itself yet. Cohen and her staff built their computer newspaper in HyperCard and served it locally. (“Stanford students who want to view the ‘newspaper’ will be able to call it up from any high-end Macintosh, from the Classic II on up, that is linked to the campus network,” a 1992 news release boasted. “Readers will be presented with a table of contents, from which they can transfer one or two stories at a time onto their own comput-

ers.”) Downloads took three to five minutes. “I was just hooked,” Cohen says. “I wasn't interested in pursuing traditional journalism anymore.” When she graduated, she turned down a few print jobs of the kind that editors of elite campus dailies used to glide into, and bartended for a year, looking for something more in line with her interests.

That something turned out to be *HotWired*, the Web-magazine arm of *Wired*, which launched, in 1994, with a mandate to bring journalism online. Cohen began as an intern and stayed for six years. The experience helped to teach her how readers approached the media world of the Internet. *HotWired* sold the first banner ad on the Web (“Seriously, sorry,” Cohen says) and was one of the first Web sites to feature reader-comment sections below articles. It also carried her to TED, which she first attended in the winter of 1998.

Cohen thought she was done with the Web when Chris Anderson hired her seven years later; his hopes for building out the TED brand centered on TV. But Cohen couldn't get a single station excited about the idea of broadcasting TED talks. “I thought, If it's too intellectual for the BBC, I must be doing something wrong,” she told me.

YouTube had just launched in beta. In October, Apple released its video iPod. Cohen sensed that online video—which had been crashing back to Earth for more than a decade—might finally be approaching its escape velocity. She hired a filmmaker specializing in the Web, Jason Wishnow, and began planning TED's first video podcast, hoping that building a small following online would make a better case for TV pickup.

Wishnow arrived at TED with two convictions: that most lecture videos are mind-numbingly boring, and that this tended to be a function of the filming—what he calls the “junior-high-school-play” style of cinematography, with one camera shooting grainy footage at the back of the room. Today, Long Beach talks are filmed, in the spirit of a live rock concert, with eight cameras: a centered lens for closeups; two medium-distance cameras on either side of the room; a remote-controlled tower camera, stage right; a handheld, roaming upstage; two fixed, unmanned cameras, one trained on the orchestra seats and the other giving



a rear panorama; and a wide-angle lens mounted on a giant jib that flies above the audience.

Editing emphasizes movement. “If you think about the best talks you’ve ever heard, they tend to impact you on an emotional level,” Wishnow says. “We borrowed from the language of cinema to achieve that effect.” TED favors tight shots for sensitive moments—“to gaze into a speaker’s eyes”—and to make an intimate frame for small Web-player screens. Most lectures begin with introductions, throat-clearings, and lame jokes, but TED prunes all that out. TED’s videos start with a clamorous, animated opening; a swell of applause is added, and then they cut to what editors find to be the first interesting moment of the talk. Awkward silences, microphone troubles, factual errors on slides, the dribbling of water on shirtfronts, stumbles onstage—all such infelicities are elided. Wide shots or reaction cutaways speed up ponderous talks or slow down rushed ones.

These days, Anderson, Cohen, and a few other staffers decide which lectures will go online, and when. Clustered around a whiteboard in the office, they label Post-its with eligible talks, while Anderson runs back and forth from his desk, checking audience-reaction stats and saying things like “Reggie Watts—these people *loved* him!” Then they move the Post-its around, in seven-day clusters, building weekly tables of con-

tents. “We actually try to be a magazine,” Emily McManus, who edits the TED.com Web site, says.

“Since the moment June posted six videos on a corner of our Web site, we’ve been on a rocket ride,” Tom Rielly, TED’s community director, recalls. He is wry and voluble, with tousled red hair and turquoise tortoiseshell glasses. He attended his first conference in 1990, and has been to more TED events than anyone alive. Even measured against the conference’s storied history, the past few years have brought startling success. When Cohen started researching podcasting, in 2005, she read about a popular business podcast that had been played forty thousand times, and used that as a goal for traffic. Today, the average TED video gets forty thousand views within twenty-four hours. Cohen had wondered if releasing free videos would kill ticket sales, but the first conference after the video launch sold out in a week, at higher prices, with a thousand-person waiting list.

The first time I met Cohen, at a TEDx event last fall, she came over to talk to me during one of the breaks. We stood in an aisle as the theatre cleared and the crew began checking equipment onstage. I asked her what her favorite TED talks were. She thought for a moment, and then cited Hans Rosling, a Swedish public-health professor, and Wade Davis, an anthropologist. Placing one hand across her chest and swaying gently back and

forth, she quoted a line from Davis’s 2003 talk, about the disappearance of the world’s rare languages, the way someone might recall a favorite line of Byron. “Every language is an old-growth forest of the mind,” she recited. Then, quietly, she added, “It sets my heart on fire.”

The TED talk is today a sentimental form. Once, searching for transport, people might have read Charles Dickens, rushed the dance floor, watched the Oscars, biked Mount Tamalpais, put on Rachmaninoff, put on the Smiths, played Frisbee, poured wine until someone started reciting “somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond.” Now there is TED. “I got all inspired and my hair stood on end and I got weepy-like and energized and enthused,” wrote a participant in an online TED-discussion forum. (The talk that brought on such delirium was about education.) Debby Ruth, a Long Beach attendee, told me that she started going to TED after reaching a point in her life when “nothing excited me anymore”; she returns now for a yearly fix. TED may present itself as an ideas conference, but most people seem to watch the lectures not so much for the information as for how they make them feel.

Should we be grateful to TED for providing this form of transcendence—and on the Internet, of all places? Or should we feel manipulated by one more product attempting to play on our



emotions? It's tricky, because the ideas undergirding a TED talk are both the point and, for viewers seeking a generic TED-type thrill, essentially beside it: the appeal of TED comes as much from its presentation as from its substance.

Zoref's crowd-sourced lecture was a case in point—a talk designed, by TED watchers, to be as TED Talk-like as possible. “About a year ago, I attended TEDx Tel Aviv,” Zoref explained near the beginning of his presentation, after throwing out opening questions to get the audience involved. He was pivoting to address the left side of the theatre, then the right, placing a beat of silence after every phrase, like a standardized-test proctor waiting for students to fill in their Zip Codes. He was dressed in a gray button-down and dark slacks, and his right ear had been fitted with a small, flesh-colored microphone. He continued, “It was then that I decided to share my dream with my Facebook friends. This is what it looked like.”

Zoref pressed his clicker, and a video played on the screen behind him. The video was of Zoref and another guy, sitting in large chairs. “My dream is to speak at TED,” the onscreen Zoref told his friend. His friend replied that they had a better chance of winning the lottery, and the Long Beach audience erupted into laughter. Zoref, who had until that point been breathing like a marathon runner, loosened up.

Recounting how he crowd-sourced ideas for the talk, he went on, “Or Sagy,

a sixteen-year-old, suggested that I recreate the original crowd-wisdom experiment from one hundred years ago.” He clicked to a slide of Or Sagy's Facebook page. “It's really, really tiny.” He pinched two fingers together. “So you need to pay very close attention.” The ox plodded out on cue, looking bemused. “We all know TEDx,” Zoref went on, priming one of his favorite laugh lines. “Starting today, we have TEDox.”

There was chortling like a weak rain through the house. Zoref told viewers to guess the animal's weight and enter their answers on a Web site; later in the presentation, TED would average the responses. Then he offered up a flight of stories: about a pastor who crowd-sources his sermons; about a writer who diagnosed her son's disease using Facebook; about a woman who's “raising her child using crowd wisdom.”

“Oh, no!” someone said.

Zoref turned and grinned. “She's doing that on a daily basis. And listen very good”—he thrust a finger toward the doubtful regions of the audience—“she told me she feels as if Supernanny is helping her.”

As a research report, Zoref's talk was basic and rote: he offered no proprietary information, and although his arguments dovetailed with any number of articles and books on crowd wisdom (not least, James Surowiecki's “The Wisdom of Crowds”), he did not cite them. As a performance, though, it was delightful. When Zoref called for the results of the ox voting, he

found that more than five hundred people had submitted guesses, averaging to 1,792 pounds. The animal's actual weight was 1,795. The audience cheered. “My biggest lesson is that we can all use crowd wisdom not just in thinking, but also to make our dreams come true,” Zoref said. “For me, being here today is a dream come true!” The crowd rose to its feet.

Those elements—an opening of direct address, a narrative of personal stake, a research summary, a précis of potential applications, a revelation to drive it home, and an ending that says, Go forth and help humanity—form the basic arc of many TED talks. As with lots of things, though, the magic is in the execution. When Jill Bolte Taylor narrated her own stroke, she teared up speaking about how, as she lost her rational intelligence, she experienced a state of “nirvana” that tapped the “life-force power of the universe.” Her talk is the second-most-viewed of all time on TED.com.

Establishing intellectual credentials in order to break past them gives TED a somewhat vaporous tone. Tears are not uncommon. More than half of Long Beach talks end in standing ovations. “I'll be on instant messenger with Long Beach and I'll I.M. that there's going to be a standing ovation,” Kelly Stoetzel, another curator, told me. “I can tell, always.” An ovation of notable length and passion is called a “TED moment.”

This year's TED moment came from Bryan Stevenson, a public-interest lawyer who leads the Equal Justice Initiative, which provides representation for low-income defendants and advocates for a fairer legal process. (He argued *Miller v. Alabama*, the case on which the Supreme Court ruled last week, opposing the mandatory sentencing of juvenile homicide offenders to life imprisonment without parole.) Stevenson started with a story about the sense of personal identity his grandmother instilled in him, and then discussed a justice system wracked by racial and socioeconomic bias. “As rational as we are, and as committed to intellect as we are, innovation, creativity, development comes not from the ideas in our mind alone,” he said.

When Stevenson finished, with a line harking back to the civil-rights struggles of the nineteen-fifties, the Long Beach crowd leaped up and began cheering, and it didn't stop until Chris Anderson qui-

eted the room down, nearly a minute later. The next day, just before the first break, Anderson put out a call for contributions in support of one of Stevenson's campaigns; by the time the conference recessed for lunch, people in the theatre had pledged more than \$1.1 million.

Richard Saul Wurman, who invented the TED conference, in 1984, lives in Newport, Rhode Island, in a gated Gilded Age mansion made to look like an eighteenth-century country home. When I arrived one day, in midwinter, he showed me into his study, which was painted forest-green and packed with baubles: Teddy bears beneath glass bells, sneakers speckled with paint (a gift from the artist Dale Chihuly), a large bowl filled with multicolored baseballs and globe ornaments, three bent spoons, and an action figure in his own image, propped up and ready to fight. Not long after I'd sat down, he stood—"Come with me"—and led me to an adjoining cottage, where the walls were hung with portraits and magazine profiles of Wurman, elegantly laminated.

To spend time with Wurman, a keen, fast-talking seventy-seven-year-old who was trained as an architect, is to enter a world whose careful design, childlike restlessness, and narrative authority feels—for want of a better term—TED-like. He designed much of the furniture in his house; the grounds are landscaped to his specifications. Wurman's attention span operates on TED-like rhythms, with frequent scenery changes and breaks, and although an assistant screens his calls, I never saw him turn one down. "I'm sorry—I have a life," he said at one point, rushing to the nearest phone. At another point, he announced to me that it was the time of day he always feeds his dogs, sprang up, and left the room for several minutes. If you ask him why, given all the things a wealthy and well-connected man could be doing, he has spent four decades organizing conferences, he will look at you as if you asked him why he's wearing pants. "I'm not an athlete, I'm not an entertainer, and I'm not smart," he says. "I have no skills, I'm abrasive, I can't type. What would you like me to do?"

When Wurman created TED, it ran for four days, at the Monterey Conference Center, and tickets cost four hundred and

seventy-five dollars. The speaker lineup included Herbie Hancock, Benoît Mandelbrot, and Nicholas Negroponte. Nowadays, speaking with Wurman—who has published more than sixty books, on subjects ranging from Louis Kahn to information anxiety—means being drawn into a sort of arts-and-tech version of Hollywood, in which everyone is known by his or her first name, every hangout session is reported ("Yo-Yo, when I was on the plane with him, wanted to have this young man from Bangladesh come to see me"), and projects are perpetually being discussed. Early TED conferences introduced Adobe Photoshop, and showed the Apple Macintosh only a few weeks after its unveiling; still, Wurman says he's not much interested in keeping viewers happy.

"It's not the audience's dinner party," Wurman told me over lunch. "If they want to pay me money and come, fine. If they don't like it, get the fuck out of here! I'll give them their money back. It's *my* dinner party. I am not a smart person. If it's fun for me and interesting to me and understandable to me, other people have historically found it interesting."

By the turn of the millennium, though, Wurman's restlessness was catching up with him. "For eighteen years, I did a better version of TED," he says; he didn't want to keep doing it indefinitely. Chris Anderson was at that moment a publisher—he'd started out with tech-hobbyist magazines, in the nineteen-eighties, and subsequently

launched *Business 2.0*, a product of and casualty of the boom years—who was looking to move beyond print journalism. He made a buyout offer through his company Future Network, and Wurman sold him TED Conferences, LLC, for twelve million dollars, plus stock.

"As a media entrepreneur, I'd looked at passion—passion was the litmus test for whether a media property had legs," Anderson says. "Even though there weren't very many people at the conference, they were interesting, influential people, and their level of passion for this event was off the charts." Soon after the initial sale (and the tech bust), Anderson left Future Network and took TED with him, buying it with his nonprofit, the Sapling Foundation, for six million dollars.

The men are temperamental opposites. Where Wurman presents himself as an iconoclastic oracle, Anderson trades in an Oxbridge style of self-deprecation, apologizing for his feeble efforts even as he drives his cannons swiftly up the hill. (Anderson took only one call during the time I spent with him; it was from Michael Bloomberg.) When Anderson speaks, it's with his gaze cast to one side; when he listens, it's with narrowed eyes and his lips slightly open, as if trying to taste a passing breeze, traits that give him an air of feline circumspection. He wears a lot of vests.

Anderson and Wurman have had a



"You'll be in charge of the music down here."

difficult relationship since the sale. It reached a nadir in 2006, when, according to Anderson, Wurman scheduled his E.G. (“Entertainment Gathering”) conference to run concurrently with TED. (The dates were later changed.) Today, they speak about each other with the mild passive-aggression of two people who have got what they want after a tiring sortie in divorce court. Wurman is no longer invited to Long Beach; when I asked about the exclusion, Anderson described him as “a wonderful, quirky genius” who was prone to excess. “He started talking about this idea that the prepared talk was finished—I think his words were, ‘I now must destroy what I created’—and, to me, that was not the most constructive basis on which to come.”

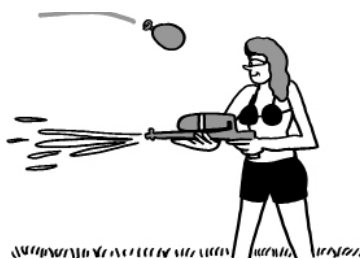
This year, Wurman has a new conference, WWW.WWW (“The first W stands for World”), which will run in September. It is costing him a million dollars to produce, and its lineup features several old friends (Frank Gehry, Herbie Hancock, Yo-Yo Ma, Nicholas Negroponte), plus some new ones. Instead of delivering a prepared talk, participants will be paired and turned loose for free-form discussion; Wurman will film the talks in black-and-white, and the discussions will be available through an associated app. There will be only seventy-three ticketed seats. This is another way of saying that, besides Wurman and his chosen speakers, WWW.WWW will be a conference with almost no people in it.

Today, TED has a lot of people in it, and their interaction in the corridors and restaurants and parties of Long Beach is the reason for the conference’s strict admissions policy. The event really begins on the flight into town, where TEDsters find one another en route to the lavatory and chat in the aisles until the seat-belt light goes on. It continues in the baggage claim, where they say things like “Entrepreneurship should be taught as a life skill,” and then on into the taxis, which they share to one of the conference’s reserved hotels near the water. By the time official events are under way, some of the most valuable direct-contact information in America is circulating as if at a freshman mixer. “Nobody told me I would need to bring two hundred business cards

to TED,” Susan Cain, the introversion expert, told me at a buffet one night. She was doubled over writing her e-mail address on paper scraps, against her thigh. TED’s attendee list looks like something a Harvard development officer might hallucinate after huffing too much envelope glue.

“I was joking last night that if a meteor had hit that party, it would have wiped out forty per cent of the gross national product,” someone shouted one evening, in the crowded lobby bar of the Westin, which TED had taken over. It was approaching midnight, and Cameron Carpenter, the organist, was playing jazzified Chopin on a grand piano. People looked tired and a little drunk; many of them had sunk into the beanbag-chair ocean. Everyone, it gradually emerged, was looking for Jeff Bezos. There are no Ferragamo suits on display at TED, no dresses by Lanvin, but details like the beanbag chairs make tangible the conference’s greatest luxury: the opulence of easy access.

In this respect, TED’s lore is self-sustaining. Hans Rosling, TED’s luckiest discovery and most influential muse, uses data-set animations, moving bubble graphs that render public-health data as it changes, challenging conventional wisdom about the developing world. He first brought the animations, which his son and daughter-in-law had programmed, to the conference in 2006. “After my TED talk, Larry Page from Google ran up on the stage, looked at



me from top to feet, and said, ‘Who wrote the code?’” Rosling delightedly told me. Within a year, Google had acquired both his software and his son and daughter-in-law.

It is easy to dismiss such encounters as *élite* glad-handing. But that would ignore the peculiar stylistic exchange that makes TED so attractive to begin with—especially for academics like Rosling, who were used to limited audiences. By most measures, TED shapes its style against the

mores of academia. Educational lectures are set at a podium; TED prizes theatrical movement. Academic work relies on communities of shared premises and interpretive habit; TED tries to communicate without those givens. Scholarship holds objectivity as a virtue; TED aims for the heart. If the thirties and forties were the golden age of the Great Books programs—the tools of a middle class striving toward the academy—TED is a recourse for college-educated adults who want to close the gap between academic thought and the lives they live now.

There is, perhaps, an air of wishfulness to that endeavor. Two very different ways of thinking about ideas shape intellectual life today, and TED’s sentimental gestures arise from efforts to obscure the difference between them. One way is to see ideas as entities that speak for themselves, that can be harvested, that inspire and uplift people who handle them—sunflowers of the mind. Research science, technology, and business enterprises tend to perceive ideas this way, partly because their products are frequently self-contained: the software works, the vaccine finally exists, and the stalk of specialized inquiry that got us there no longer matters. (Technology demonstrations, or phrases like “One recent study found”—both key TEDisms—are essentially sunflower-picking exercises.) A sunflower, after all, is a thing that you can carry around for quite some time. Its form and beauty hold after it has lost its roots. It can be given to a friend or set in a vase to add some substance to a desultory room.

Yet not all ideas are sunflowers. Some, particularly on the softer side of the academy, are more akin to bougainvillea—thick, interlocking vines whose blooms are shaped much like their leaves. The most vibrant ideas here depend on precedent for structure: in order to understand why *C* is brilliant, you must be aware of *A* and *B*. Most specialists in the university today are trained to think of their fields in this way. Of course, bougainvillea flowers are hard to separate and carry with you. Try to “use” an idea from the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas quickly on a TV talk show, and you’ll confuse many people and irk those who are not confused. This isn’t because the viewers are stupid, or because Levinas’s ideas aren’t useful. It’s because their usefulness is clear in a specialized

context; beyond that, the blossoms crush and wither. You cannot put a bougainvillea flower in a vase.

The sunflower people and the bougainvillea people come together well enough in universities, but outside—where most of us make our lives—their coexistence is awkward. More Americans than ever before are taught in school, by specialists, to think about “the world of ideas” in a cumulative, contingent sense. (College enrollment in the United States has more than doubled since 1970, over which period academic specialization has intensified, too.) And yet, in the realm of industry, it’s a plug-and-play model of ideas that yields rewards. What to do? An obvious solution is cross-pollination. TED has been struggling with that effort, trying to join the different ways we use and think about ideas, starting at the point of education. (“The heart of the TED idea, I think, is that all of knowledge is connected,” Chris Anderson told me at one point. “People spend a lot of time going very narrow.”) And the success it has encountered is as telling as the criticism.

“If you were to visit education as an alien and say, ‘What’s it for, public education?’” Sir Ken Robinson said in a 2006 talk at TED, “I think you’d have to conclude that the whole purpose of public education throughout the world is to produce university professors.” He argued for breaking down the “hierarchy” of our traditional system, for letting children’s strengths and passions, rather than *idées fixes* about preprofessional training, shape how they learn. “Our education system has mined our minds, in the way that we strip-mine the earth, for a particular commodity,” he told the audience. It was a resonant point. Robinson’s lecture had an exceptional viewership when it first appeared on TED.com. Today, it is the most viewed TED talk of all time.

On the last night of the conference, I caught up with Zoref at the Long Beach aquarium, where dinner was being served. A gigantic model of a blue whale was suspended over the main gallery; upstairs, air mattresses covered with fitted sheets and pillows were spread among the fish tanks, giving the dim walkways a tincture of *louche* decadence. As the evening wore on and the drinks flowed, groups of talking TEDsters grew bigger



“Hey! You’re pinching me!”

and louder, and the party began migrating into the aquarium’s dark places.

Zoref was sitting on a short stool in front of a tank. His jeans and red shirt glowed in the aquarium’s fluorescent light; the wall behind him was modelled to look like the inside of a cave. I asked him how he felt. “They gave me a DVD,” he said. “I watched it, and I felt like, *yeah*.”

He closed his eyes slowly, as if trying to recall the feeling. Zoref’s talk had seemed in danger of running slightly overtime, and Cohen had wandered onstage to nudge him toward his ending, but he appeared not to care about the little snafu. He had earned his standing ovation. He had been congratulated by people whom he never thought he’d meet. (“The director of DARPA came to me, hugged me, kissed me, and told me this was an amazing talk,” he said.) Back

in Israel, he’d made the national news.

Zoref told me about a woman working at the registration desk who had praised his presentation. “She started to think about her life, about her dreams, about her aspirations, and she told me, ‘Hey, Lior, you made me think, and I called my son and I talked about it, and we’re going to do things differently.’”

Zoref sighed, a sigh of multiple reliefs. After a while, he added, “I was so happy to see that the image I had before, just from watching the videos and imagining what it would look like, was true.” Beside him, brightly colored fish were circling—purple queen anthias and lyretail fairy basslets and thicklip wrasses—and, in the dark, the glow of their tank spilled out sideways and against his face, like moonlight. “I was even more impressed in real life,” he said. ♦