
The Extent of Influence that Genre Conventions Have on TED Talks

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Introduction

Communication has evolved greatly in recent times, especially when it refers to sharing information. Sending messages directly and indirectly has come a long way from what are now considered antiquated methods such as the fax machine and the handwritten letter. The internet, for example, has digitized and taken over almost every single method of intercommunication between human beings. The digital spreading of useful information has become second nature, as we have access to a seemingly endless source of information through the web. Over the years, audio-visual content has also evolved into a significant form of communication. Videos provide a different, more innovative way of presenting a topic to an audience: instead of reading about it and coming up with their own conclusions about a certain topic of interest, people who view these videos are exposed to a more interactive method of communication.

One of the most influential sites that offers new information delivered in video form is the TED Talk site, a database of videos that offers a wide variety of information, for free, on the internet. TED Talks—whose acronym stands for Technology, Entertainment and Design—are some of the most recognized new forms of communication of innovative ideas that exist in the world. They are presented at conferences held throughout the year that feature a variety of speakers that regularly break barriers of knowledge by transmitting their thoughts and projects to a live audience, as well as on the internet. TED is a non-profit organization dedicated to the spreading of new and relevant information via conferences and free, accessible videos published on the institution's webpage. According to the webpage, "TED Talks are videos that present a great idea in 18 minutes or less. They're filmed at flagship TED conferences, independent TEDx events, and other programs. Their goal is to share Ideas Worth Spreading—in fields like science, technology, business, culture, art and design—around the world" (TED). The speakers at TED conferences are experts in their fields, and often have innovative and refreshing takes on several of today's world practices.

Because of their increased popularity and success in sharing knowledge and ideas on a vast amount of fields and topics, many people have dedicated studies to find out more about the way TED Talks work. These studies, however, are usually focused toward the talks' rhetorical structure, and often focus on identifying factors that would be of use in imparting knowledge to students in today's school classrooms. Keith Grant-Davie defines rhetoric and rhetorical situation as "a set of related factors whose interaction creates and controls a discourse" (350). This suggests that any activity that needs to be answered with some kind of discourse or communicative interaction to accomplish a specific goal is a rhetorical situation. Chang and Huang, in their research, identified "the rhetorical and linguistic nature of TED talks . . . to explore their pedagogical potential in the training of oral presentation skills" (31) by generating a rhetorical prototype of 58 different TED Talks (29). Their results suggest that all or most TED Talks use seven main rhetorical moves to present their idea to an audience: "Listener orientation, topic introduction, speaker presentation,

topic development, closure, and concluding messages” (Chang and Huang 38). During each one of these moves, the TED Talk speaker would accomplish a milestone that would have a different impact on the audience’s perception of the speaker, the presentation, and the quality of the information being delivered. These rhetorical moves play a crucial role in imparting the desired message correctly and effectively. For that reason, the decision of how to approach these moves in relation to sequence or style of presentation was personalized by each speaker to adapt to his or her particular topic.

One of the rhetorical moves that is commonly featured in TED Talks is identified by researcher Giuseppina Scotto di Carlo. In her research, she argues that “pathos is established [in TED Talks] in this relatively new form of popularisation that breaches the typical ‘scientist-mediator-audiences’ triangularisation, bringing scientists directly into contact with their audiences” (23). Pathos, defined by Braziller and Kelnfeld as “an appeal to an audience’s emotions or values” (11), is used as a tool to be able to relate with the audience that the presenter is talking to, and it is commonly used alongside logical appeals to create a sense of credibility for the speaker. This is accomplished through the communication of a balance of knowledge and personal vulnerability, which creates a connection with the audience. The use of this and many other rhetorical moves, however, is optional, and limited only to a circumstance called for by the context of the talk.

Chang and Huang developed a quantitative genre prototype of TED Talks based on the rhetorical moves used while imparting it. Amy Devitt explains that “genres develop . . . because they respond appropriately to [rhetorical] situations that writers encounter repeatedly” (qtd. in Dirk 252). These situations often ask for a response and, since the situations are recurring, the responses are going to be similar, as is the case for the TED Talk. All TED Talks, no matter how different their topics of interest are, aim to reach an audience of people to make an impact on their lives and help create a global network to share important information.

Even though several TED Talks have been deeply analyzed before, the qualitative information regarding the genre of the TED Talk, and the genre conventions—rules and characteristics that all pieces of writing have in common to be able to be considered as part of that genre (Braziller and Kelnfeld 18), and which define the genre—are lacking. More specifically, there has been insufficient research that addresses the individual differences between each TED Talk. Identifying these differences would demonstrate the amount of flexibility that each author is allowed, in each TED Talk, to modify and personalize their own presentation to fit the context and situation that the talk requires, while still falling into the category of a TED Talk. This discovery would lead to a better understanding of the genre conventions of TED Talks, and the expectations that the genre of TED Talks holds to be able to communicate information effectively.

This paper searches for the extent of the influence of genre conventions present in TED Talks, as well as the rhetorical moves that presenters make when allowed certain flexibility in their talks, while still participating and creating a piece for a single genre. My research will focus on the following questions:

- How do the different genre conventions and characteristics of a TED Talk work and have worked, individually and collectively, to provide appropriate answers to the specific rhetorical situation that TED addresses?
- How does each TED Talk presenter personalize the answer to a very similar, recurring rhetorical situation to produce drastically different video results that are still considered to be one single genre?

I answer these questions by analyzing interviews and podcasts with presenters and members of the TED non-profit, performing a case study on different successful TED Talks, and engaging in observation and genre analysis of the structure of TED Talks.

The results of my research show that TED Talks are formatted as a presentation that aims to be innovative and different for every presenter. Genre conventions vary based on whether the focus

is on the collective TED Talk movement or on the individual formulation of a TED Talk. The TED Talk, if viewed from an individual perspective, can be analyzed as having set boundaries and rigid genre conventions that must absolutely be followed for the TED Talk to be successful, and the presenters then provide flexibility and diversity to their own talks as an adaptation to the set format of the talk. On the other hand, the collection of talks that TED represents offers a complementary, but slightly different set of genre conventions, which affect the general composition of a TED Talk. From this point of view, TED Talks' genre conventions include the flexibility, difference, and innovation that were just an extra, or an addition to each individual TED Talk. In the more general scope of TED Talks, the genre conventions require the speaker to be unique, when in the more specific, individual scope of TED Talks, speakers followed a pattern, and chose to break the rigid convention to mold it to their own unique topic.

Methodology

Data Collection

Chris Anderson, the owner and curator of TED Talks, offers, in the TED website, vast amounts of information on TED Talks such as interviews, comments, information about the non-profit, instructions to organize an independent (TEDx) event or conference, as well as the collection of TED Talks themselves. To collect data on the genre conventions of TED Talks, I first analyzed several interviews with Anderson, in which he discusses his opinions on the success and history of the TED non-profit. Once I understood the purpose behind the conferences and the talks, I observed and searched new information on what characteristics are crucial to make an effective TED Talk. I analyzed more interviews, now focused on how TED Talks are structured and delivered.

The observation of a small documentary, "Behind The TED Talk 2009," allowed insight into the performance of the talks, and the final preparation that the speakers undergo before taking the stage, as well as the use of tools that help the speakers time and pace their own rehearsed presentations. From the TED Talk website, I analyzed the information provided on how to prepare future TEDx speakers at an independent conference.

Finally, I performed a case study on four different, very successful TED Talks: Jill Bolte Taylor's "My Stroke of Insight," James Veitch's "This is What Happens When You Reply to Scam Emails," Dan Lok's "The Invisible Force—Self-image—Enables You to Achieve Great Goals," and Roman Mars's "Why City Flags May Be The Worst-Designed Thing You've Never Noticed." I first gathered insight in each of the speakers' preparation and editing processes by watching interview videos and podcasts. Then, I analyzed these four videos by identifying the factors they had in common regarding the structure of the talk and the method of presentation as well as their differences and personal modifications to the standard model provided by the TED Talks preparation website, and interviews with Chris Anderson.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data collected, I employed the concept of genre conventions, which affect how a genre is structured. Kain and Wardle argue that genre conventions can include set elements such as style, tone or voice, design, sources, etc., with the genre conventions provide guidelines on what a piece of writing should accomplish in answering the recurring rhetorical situation that the genre is faced with (19). From the interviews and podcasts collected, I derived these genre elements that allowed me to identify most of the genre conventions of a TED Talk. These genre conventions, along with the responses to rhetorical situations that arise, compose a genre. (Dirk; Braziller and Kleinfeld). Dirk also mentions that, apart from the previous information, "a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centered . . . on the action it is used to accomplish" (qtd. in Dirk 252). This means that genres are essential to being able to accomplish certain actions.

These actions, or reactions from the audience who is hearing the talk, can be accomplished by the strategic use of mediums and modes.

Braziller and Kleinfeld argue that the mode is the way that the information is being communicated to the audience. This can be through visual, audible, and written aids and tools (21). The modes influence how the audience will interpret the information, as they are responsible for the audience's interaction (21). When a rhetor chooses a mode, he or she has to identify the appropriate medium to communicate the information. The medium is the specific tool used for the communication. Depending on the context of the situation and the purpose of the rhetor, different modes and media are chosen to cause different reactions from the audience.

With the case study, I was able to point out the different modes and media used for each talk, and analyze how these decisions impacted the audience. A further focus on the delivery techniques of TED Talks allowed me to identify the use of different tools, physical and abstract, to produce a unique effect on the audience and their new understanding of an innovative topic. I was also able to analyze the aspects of flexibility and inflexibility in delivering a talk when compared to the conventions provided by TED, as well as the different outcomes and rhetorical moves that each speaker performed to answer to the TED rhetorical situation.

After analyzing the four individual TED Talks, along with the interviews, documentary, and podcasts, I discovered a new way of analyzing TED Talks from two different points of view. This prompted me to connect TED Talks to a system of genres, which consists of the analysis of genre sets and genre systems within TED Talks. A system of genres, according to Bazerman, is "a framework which organizes work, attention, and accomplishment" (375) of an activity. Genre systems, which Bazerman explains are "several genre sets of people working together in an organized way, plus the patterned relations in the production, flow, and use of documents," describes the relationships between genre sets, which are "the collection of types of texts someone in a particular role is likely to produce" (Bazerman 374). A genre system works in a more collective way than a genre set, and usually people working within a genre system have a common goal in mind, or goals that all relate to one another. It includes all the types of writing involved in accomplishing a common social activity. This final analysis of TED Talks allowed me to identify the genre conventions that are active in the TED scope and differentiate the necessary flexibility allowed to each speaker to respond to their specific rhetorical situation effectively.

Results

TED Talks Emerge as a Genre

The origin of TED Talks can be traced back to 1984, in Monterey, California. Architect and graphic designer Richard Saul Wurman organized a conference focused on the topics of technology, entertainment and design in the hopes of commemorating the recent advances that top scientists had accomplished in those three fields. Wurman's hope was to host an annual conference with the brightest minds in various scientific fields, and have "the ultimate dinner party" (qtd. in Bryant). In February of 1984, Wurman hosted his first conference in the Monterey Conference Center in California. Among the 300 attendees, there were representatives of several innovative companies such as Pixar and Sony. Speakers included Mickey Schulhof, at the time president of Sony, and Nicholas Negroponte, founder of the MIT Media Lab (Moran). These characters demoed improvements and inventions that would later be considered the newest devices and technologies in the world. Some of the products featured in the conference were the compact disk, the beginnings of voice-recognition technology, and the introduction of the early Macintosh 128k by Steve Jobs (Moran).

Despite having some of the best thinkers and innovators present, the event was not as successful as Wurman would have liked it to be, and the conference lost money. Reflecting back on

it, Wurman remembers, “I lost money on the first TED conference, but people talked about it long after the event was over. What transpired at TED went viral—and this was before the days of the Internet, texting and smartphones” (Moran). The lasting effect of the first conference, and the impact it had on the audience, inspired Wurman to try again in 1990, even though he ran the risk of failure a second time. The turnout for the second TED event was, financially, very much unlike the first one. The conference made a profit, and Wurman was able to establish TED as an annual conference for the advancement of technology, entertainment, and design for the world.

By that time, Wurman had introduced the rule of the eighteen-minute talk. This rule was based on the idea that the average human attention span lasts about eighteen minutes; hence a speaker will only be listened to with utmost attention if the message that he or she is trying to communicate does not take more than eighteen minutes to deliver (Bryant). This new way of approaching speeches was one of the characteristics that set TED Talks apart from other conferences.

In 2001, after eleven years of yearly conferences organized by Wurman, media entrepreneur Chris Anderson decided to acquire the rights to the TED conferences and start an organization. Anderson also made the key decision of turning TED into a non-profit. This decision allowed Anderson to “stand by the principles that made TED great: the inspired format, the breadth of content, the commitment to seek out the most interesting people on Earth and let them communicate their passion” (“History of TED”). The TED non-profit expanded tremendously after Anderson’s modifications, and the recognition that the annual conferences received called for an even bigger expansion of the TED conferences. Anderson, talking about the expansion of TED in the early 2000s, mentions that the non-profit “tried and failed to get TED onto television. But in 2006, with the arrival of online video, we started ‘TED Talks’ as an experimental video podcast” (“The History of TED Talks”). A year after the birth of YouTube, TED posted six “talks” that had been featured in that year’s conference as an experiment to globalize the non-profit. The videos were released for free onto the internet. Within days of publication, the TED Talks had received a million views, marking the beginning of TED Talks’ online success.

TED Talks as a Genre Today

In 2017, the TED Talk is considered one of the best-known educational, inspirational, and inventive videos on the internet. The non-profit organization has added numerous features, activities, and requirements for TED Talks, conferences, and independent events. Some of these additions include the implementation of a TED prize, a TED Global conference for international ideas, and the ability to franchise the TED concept by creating independent, regional conferences called TEDx Talks, among many more events. The growth of TED has also created a common goal that inspires and drives the non-profit, which is the desire to communicate “Ideas Worth Spreading” to the world. The TED philosophy changed into encouraging any and all people that have something meaningful to share to come forward and speak. Because of this concept, TED Talks now feature hundreds of topics and different ideas.

The diversity and variety of ideas that are found within TED Talks are difficult to place into one category, or even a single rhetorical situation. Every single talk answers to a personal issue, story, or experience of the featured speaker. This led many to believe that perhaps TED Talks was starting to lose its focus. Chris Anderson, in an interview, talked about this issue and provided insight into the rhetorical situation that occurs in every single TED Talk that exists: “Even though these speakers and their topics all seem completely different, they actually do have one key common ingredient. And it’s this: your number one task as a speaker is to transfer into your listeners’ minds an extraordinary gift: an idea” (Anderson “TED’s Secret” 0:57-1:14). This concept allowed TED Talks to encompass a limitless amount of information and speeches. One speaker at a TED conference commented, “One of the interesting things of a TED Talk is that they’ve actually evolved into a new unit of information. You have things like a formulated song, a ninety-minute

movie, a five-page article, and then you have an eighteen minute talk” (qtd. in “Behind the TED Talk” 5:26-5:36). Ideas communicated via an impacting eighteen-minute talk became the recurring reason why TED Talks existed, thus, what made it a genre, regardless of the topic chosen by the speaker.

Genre Conventions of The Modern TED Talk

The genre of the TED Talk has evolved and expanded throughout time according to the new technologies available to the world. The activities of the non-profit have in fact been so recognized in the modern world that the representatives have created a sort of brand name for TED Talks. This means that the videos uploaded to the internet all share specific characteristics that are proprietary and crucial for all TED Talks. These characteristics have been set aside as factors that separate a TED Talk from a common speech. In an interview, Chris Anderson states, “If communicated properly, ideas are capable of changing, forever, how someone thinks about the world and shaping their actions both now and well into the future” (“TED’s Secret” 4:40-4:47). In TED conferences, communicating an idea in a proper manner has been standardized to a certain extent to preserve the brand name that TED has constructed. This standardization takes place in all stages of the TED Talk preparation process, as well as the presentation of the speech.

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Speech Preparation

TED speakers are invited to the annual TED conference, or to independent TEDx events. They are carefully chosen among scientists and experts in various fields to deliver the best idea they have, in the best way possible. To do this, speakers go through a lengthy and meticulously formulated pre-talk writing, editing, and rehearsing process to make sure that the talk is structured and delivered according to the TED Talk standards.

The process begins six-to-nine months before the speaker’s TED Talk. “A speaker will start working with the staff and producers and editors to craft your story along with you” (qtd. in Bryant). The preparation starts with an outline and the proposal for the idea that the speaker wants to communicate to the audience. The TED website provides guidelines for scheduling each draft and stage of the talk (See Appendix A). The deadlines proposed in the schedule ensure that the speaker will be familiarized and confident with the talk so that the presentation goes smoothly.

While writing drafts for the TED Talk, the TED non-profit has very specific conventions that every speaker should follow in order to be approved and deemed worthy to be part of the brand format of the TED Talk. These are structure, brevity, and purpose. The structure of a TED Talk needs to have a “clear introduction, middle, and end” (TED). This means that there cannot be any ambiguous finales or a speech that starts out talking about the main issue without providing context to it. The talk needs to be written in a conversational tone, and the speaker needs to speak as if the script was never written, and the speaker is just having a conversation with the audience. To connect with the audience, the talk should include a pathos approach that contains honest, captivating emotion (TED). In addition to this, every speaker should avoid political agendas, religious or racial profiling, talking about their own TED Talk, trying to sell the idea to the audience

instead of communicating and spreading it, or making TED puns at any time during their talk. Speakers should also be aware of copyright laws, and make sure to not violate them.

Brevity is one of the most important genre conventions of a TED Talk, as it was established before the online talk itself. Every speaker needs to make sure that the talk takes eighteen minutes or less to deliver. The speaker should also be able to express their idea effectively in the allotted time. Editors “make sure their script is an appropriate length for their time slot, or else their content may seem cramped” (TED). To do this, speakers have to limit themselves to communicating only one idea to the audience. They have to focus on that idea and develop it so that speakers can easily relay their talk by sharing simply organized, yet powerful information about their topic.

Purpose is the third convention that a TED Talk must possess. Every idea that is delivered in TED should matter to the general audience. If the idea does not have any importance the talk is rendered useless, and its purpose of spreading a useful idea is defeated. Anderson comments that to give a successful TED Talk, the speaker ought to “give your listeners a reason to care . . . stir your audience’s curiosity. Use intriguing, provocative questions to identify why something doesn’t make sense and needs explaining” (Anderson “TED’s Secret” 5:33-5:55). When delivering a speech with purpose, the audience is supposed to be interested, and care about the speaker’s words. Only that way will the idea be successfully spread among people throughout the world.

Speech Presentation

Genre conventions and TED regulations do not stop at the time of performance at the conference. Rather, speakers are faced with a new set of rules that they must abide by for a successful TED Talk. The documentary “Behind the TED Talk 2009” revealed that TED representatives, and in some cases Anderson himself, will coach the speakers in the venue where the conference will take place. Coaching helps speakers get accustomed to the TED stage, the cameras, and the presentation style that the TED Talk must follow.

The first thing that speakers are introduced to is the countdown clock. In every TED Talk, there is a digital clock that tracks the amount of time that the speaker has left. This clock is equipped with an LED light that serves as a tracking system for speakers: “At two minutes the light, it turns yellow. Okay? When it gets down to zero—which it shouldn’t do—it will stay on zero and flash red at you, and you really must wrap up” (Anderson “TED’s Secret” 0:50-1:00). This is one of the most important conventions of the TED Talk conference, and it links directly to the speaker’s preparation for the brevity of the talk.

Stage presence is also an important convention that needs to meet TED standards. Before the conference, speakers perform a dress rehearsal where they are coached on the correct ways to behave onstage. The critiques range from posture and movement around the stage to voice intonation and demonstration of confidence. Anderson argues, “It’s much more powerful to just stand there on the stage. If you’re going to move, move deliberately and confidently, perhaps from one spot to another” (“TED’s Secret” 1:02-1:09). The presentation of the TED Talk is set to be of high calibre, so that the image of TED continues to soar above the average speech. Speakers achieve these standards by following the guidelines given by TED, and adding tools, activities, jokes, and confident moves.

TED Talks are presentations more than they are speeches. The dialogue has already been set and rehearsed, and is often repeated line by line at the stage. Speakers are expected to be familiar with their speeches, which is why there are no teleprompters allowed at the conferences. Speakers can, however, use notecards, power point slides, or any other tool that helps them finish their speech. TED Talk conferences are arranged in such a way that there are never going to be two TED Talks happening simultaneously. This means that the entire conference is gathered to listen to a single speaker at a time. This adds pressure to the speaker’s performance, which is why TED insists on thorough memorization of the talk.

The technology that captures the TED Talk has a significant role in the conventions of a TED Talk. The way that a TED Talk is filmed contributes to the overall TED Talk feel. To make sure that the talks, the speakers, and the audience are captured in the eighteen-minute video, TED has implemented a set of cameras. A crewmember commented on this factor of TED Talks. He states, "Right away we wanted to raise the production values, and that has to do with how we light everything, how we shoot everything, how we rehearse with the performers . . . we have 5 cameras circling around the speakers, two looking back on the audience, we've got one camera that is on a crane so it can just swoop in over the audience straight up to the speaker" (qtd in Behind the TED Talk 2:02-2:23). With state of the art technology, TED can create videos that are simple but captivating, focusing on the speaker, the audience, and the delivery of the speaker's idea.

Case Study: Analysis of Four Successful TED Talks

Successful TED Talks have demonstrated the ability to share an idea in a more straightforward, entertaining way than other speeches. These TED Talks communicate this idea in many different ways, using different tools, rhetorical appeals, and structures of narration. Yet these talks are considered by many as belonging to the same category as other successful TED Talks. For that to be the case, these talks have to fulfill all of the previously mentioned genre conventions, and communicate an idea to the audience. The differences between each talk, and the way that it is delivered is personalized by each speaker, who molds the genre conventions of a TED Talk to adapt to their own situation.

"The Invisible Force—Self Image—Enables You to Accomplish Great Goals" by Dan Lok

Dan Lok, entrepreneur and successful businessman, focuses his TED Talk on the idea that the way that people look at themselves is the key to success. In his talk, Lok shares his awareness about the importance of self-image. He uses quotes, statistical facts, and personal experiences to establish credibility with the audience. His pathos rhetorical move is directed toward the audience, as he makes examples about several situations that could be affected by a change in self-image. Lok uses the concept of self-image to establish a situational example that he shares with the audience. Meanwhile, the camera angles shift between the audience and the speaker, as Lok also incorporates several audience participation opportunities into his talk. He proposes "setting the room at seventy degrees. This is a metaphor for your comfort zone. It is also known as your self-image" (Lok "Invisible Force" 04:33). He then argues that people's goals tend to be higher than what each person can accomplish in the comfort zone. This, according to Lok, makes people face a difficult decision: either lower their goals and self-image, or raise them ("Invisible Force"). This metaphor is an example that Lok uses to connect with the audience and transmit his message in such a way that it is easy and entertaining for the audience.

The tools that Lok uses are limited to only his body language and stage presence. His tone is thoughtful and encouraging. He uses no PowerPoint, and is entirely alone at the stage. He demonstrates authority over the audience by sharing wisdom that he claims most people never learn in their entire lives (Lok "Invisible Force" 01:30). After explaining his topic, he demonstrates closure by inviting the audience to ask themselves questions about their self-image, and encouraging them to improve it. The talk is 16:38 minutes long, which fits into the convention that TED Talk stands by.

"This Is What Happens When You Reply to Spam Emails" by James Veitch

This TED Talk is retelling the story of comedian James Veitch's experience when he replied to a spam email that appeared in his email's inbox section. Veitch starts out talking about the odd situation of finding an email in the inbox section that did not belong there. He then proceeds to show the audience the conversation between himself and the spammer through PowerPoint slides

that contain the contents of said emails. The outcome of this exchange makes for a hilarious story, and shares the idea that by amusing yourself with spam email replies, you are wasting the spammers' time that they would use to scam other people out of their savings (Veitch).

The talk has a light and funny tone, and it consists of reading several PowerPoint slides that make up the emailed conversation. Body language and voice intonation are very important while reading the PowerPoint slides, as it aids the audience's reaction to laugh. During the video, there are some instances in which the camera focuses on the audience's reaction to the information that is being provided by Veitch, who are mostly laughing. Despite being a long and elaborated joke, as the scammer was tricked into writing an email in which code words such as "lawyer" and "legal" were replaced with candy and sweets, names such as "gummy bear" and "peanut M&M's" (Veitch), the talk was structured as a story, told in under eighteen minutes, and delivered with confidence.

"Why City Flags May Be the Worst Designed Thing You've Never Noticed" by Roman Mars

Roman Mars is a podcaster, and a radio show host, which meant that his most comfortable place was behind a desk, talking as if he were in his podcast setting. In his TED Talk, he breaks convention completely by actually using this mode of communication while he is sitting down. He also makes use of a new multimedia tool that uses technology that is not normally used in speeches: computerized sounds, or rather, voices. Mars presents his talk as having some sort of conversation with these voices, which all talk about how city flags are so poorly designed. The use of this tool keeps the audience engaged at all times, as it is a new tool that they had not seen before used in such a way. Mars also incorporates slight moments of comedic dialogue in his speech to lighten the tone, or simply to make the talk more interesting.

The talk is about the poorly designed city flags across the United States, and how we can improve them to symbolize patriotism for the city, instead of a despicable work of art. With the help of PowerPoints that show the flags, and audio-visual aids to define key terms and provide commentary, Mars considers himself to be an "information DJ" (qtd. in Bryant). His tone is light and informative, as well as slightly emotional at the end. He first uses humor to make fun of poorly designed flags, and then closes his argument by explaining what flags should mean to the people that are represented by them, and makes an emotional connection to patriotism and pride for one's home. This video is what could be said to be a "traditional" TED Talk when it comes to length, as it is almost exactly eighteen minutes long, and shares a personal idea that is, according to Mars, worth spreading.

"My Stroke of Insight" by Jill Bolte Taylor

This TED Talk is probably one of the most watched ones on the internet. Bolte Taylor shares a personal anecdote about having a stroke, and, being a neuroanatomist, her stroke and what biologically happened inside her brain allowed her to discover a state of mind that all people should engage in. In her talk, she explains how a brain works, and states that the left hemisphere is usually in charge of controlling the logical, planned side of life, while the right hemisphere focuses on the here and now, and craves life's immediate pleasures. To establish credibility and engage her audience, she brought a human brain to the TED Talk as a tool to communicate her idea, and show the audience what happened in her own brain as she experienced the stroke.

She shared her experience as her stroke made the left hemisphere of her brain go dormant, which made her experience an inability to think logically and about her own safety. Instead, she was caught up in the moment, and she felt as if everything on Earth was beautiful, colorful, and happy (Bolte Taylor). She masks the terror of having experienced a stroke by adding a comical note or two as she explains her actions on that day. She wraps up her talk slightly over the eighteen-minute mark. Nevertheless, it communicated an idea that has spread to millions of people. During her talk, camera angles change to show the human brain, as well as the reactions from the audience,

as Bolte Taylor reaches certain key points in her speech. Her tone is emotional and informative. When thinking about her talk, she mentioned, “It was the last six minutes [that were hard]. Do I teach or do I hold the space of what I had created with the morning of the stroke? . . . In the end it was that willing to go out on a limb and the fruit was truly there” (Bolte Taylor qtd. in “Behind the TED Talk” 4:23-4:45). This shows that Bolte Taylor could have approached her TED Talk in one of many different ways. She decided to adapt the genre conventions of TED Talks and make the experience extremely intimate and personal, which made a huge impact on the audience and their response to the talk.¹

TED Talks as a System of Genres

The four individual TED Talks analyzed in the case study have several factors in common, which can be attributed to the genre conventions that TED has specifically set for every presenter. They all use the same audio-visual mode to communicate an idea, they all possess a clear introduction, middle, and closing statement, and they focus on a single idea, delivered within eighteen minutes, to make an impact. Some of these conventions, however, seem to be bent, modified, or even completely dismissed in certain TED Talks, such as Roman Mars’s radio show setup in a conference environment. Even though the fundamental rules were broken, Mars was able to share and spread an idea in an innovative way. As a result, his TED Talk is considered to be one of the best ones ever recorded. This suggests that TED takes pride and purposefully searches for people that alter their rules; as Roman Mars put it, “They want you to break convention” (qtd. in Bryant).

This desire to be original and unconventional is ever-present at the back of speakers’ and editors’ minds during the entire preparation process of a TED Talk. However, the specific TED Talk that the speaker will later present does have to follow a set amount of rules or conventions to be considered a TED Talk. This seemingly contradictory idea led me to the concept of TED Talks as a system of genres. The individual TED Talk ought to follow a fairly strict structure and purpose. The drafts and speeches that the speaker prepares form a genre set, which has to answer to the recurring rhetorical situation of producing a final draft that fits within the TED guidelines. Each individual TED Talk provides a certain level of flexibility in the genre conventions of a TED Talk; in other words, each speaker personalizes his or her TED Talk according to what the speaker is trying to communicate. This is a genre system, which includes and follows the TED Talk conventions closely, yet each speaker adds diversity and uniqueness to the talk as an extra. This extra factor is what usually makes TED Talks so successful. The originality of the communication of TED Talks is one of the reasons why TED Talks are not placed in the same category as speeches. TED Talks in general, then, have a different goal and rhetorical situation than individual TED Talks, such that the collective group of TED Talks includes the extra uniqueness of individual TED Talks in its genre conventions. TED Talks, viewed as a collection of individual talks, consists of a system of genres, and it includes all the talks, topics, and ways to communicate ideas that TED stands behind. All of these talks are unique and different from one another, which makes communicating a unique and innovative TED Talk a requirement, or convention, to be able to form a part of the general scope of TED.

Discussion

From the performed research, it is clear that the TED Talk genre has evolved and expanded greatly since it was first introduced in 1984. Richard Saul Wurman’s idea of hosting a yearly “ultimate dinner party” (qtd. in Bryant) for the brightest minds in the world to share ideas quickly advanced and propagated through the world thanks to modern technologies such as social media,

¹ See Appendix B for further reference on the rhetorical moves and structure of each TED Talk.

internet, and audio-visual technology. The genre of TED Talks nowadays includes over two thousand videos shared and viewed by millions of people every day. The amount of topic and speaker diversity is huge, yet TED Talks still fall under the category of a single genre by satisfying the response to the recurring rhetorical situation of spreading ideas throughout the world.

The combination of these genre conventions and collaboration between the individual and collective TED Talks show how TED Talks are effective in communicating ideas by implementing a non-conventional way of delivering a talk.

Despite being all part of one genre, TED Talks can be separated and categorized as a system of genres. Within this system, there are genre conventions for each TED Talk to fulfill to be considered as worthy, or as part of TED. These conventions are rigid and are shared by all the TED Talks that exist, such as being 18 minutes long, sharing an idea, memorizing the speech to perform it, and behaving in a confident and professional manner. In these individual TED Talks, the speakers have to mould, alter, or add on to these genre conventions to provide a unique, personal talk that adapts to the topic and context of the situation. Diversity and flexibility can be considered add-ons to an individual talk.

When multiple, or all the TED Talks in existence, are considered in the research, however, the conventions of the genre system of TED Talks change. The purpose of TED Talks is to share a personal idea that is worth sharing. The TED non-profit prides itself in having an innovative and unique repertoire of information on many different fields of study, presented in many different ways. This suggests that the more general system of genres of TED Talks' genre conventions include the aspect of flexibility, diversity and uniqueness to their genre conventions, as all TED Talks are required to have these characteristics. The genre conventions of an individual TED Talk presentation, and the collective TED Talk scope, are different, but they complement each other.

The combination of these genre conventions and collaboration between the individual and collective TED Talks show how TED Talks are effective in communicating ideas by implementing a non-conventional way of delivering a talk. Further research could focus on the impact that the talk has on the audience and the effect that the audience has on the TED speaker as well as a deeper exploration of what encompasses the different genre sets and systems that the TED system of genres possesses.

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APPENDIX A: TED Talk Desired Draft Progress Calendar for Speakers

Set expectations

The first draft of your speaker's talk will not be their last. Set a timeline with specific milestones for which your speaker can aim. Here's a sample timeline:

- 6 months before the event's day: Thesis and basic outline due
- 5 months out: A script or detailed outline due
- 4 months out: Second draft and first rehearsals
- 3 months out: Final draft and more rehearsals
- 2 months out: Bi-weekly rehearsals
- 1 month out: Weekly rehearsals
- 2 weeks out: Take a break. (Don't think about the talk.)
- 1 week out: Rehearsals
- 1-2 days out: Dress rehearsals

The above is just an example; your own timeline depends on your overall schedule and the needs of your speakers. Once you have set a realistic timeline with milestones in place, make sure you check in regularly to make sure your speakers are on track.

APPENDIX B: Rhetorical Appeals in TED Talks Featured in the Performed Case Study

Talk	Jill Bolte Taylor "My Stroke of Insight"	James Veitch "Spam Emails"	Dan Lok "Self-Image"	Roman Mars "Flag Design"
Length	20:11	9:49	16:38	18:19
Tone	Emotional, Serious, occasional humor	Humorous Sarcastic	Serious Occasional humor	Formal Humorous Light
Rhetorical Appeals	Pathos, Logos	Pathos	Pathos, logos	Pathos, Logos
Tools	Human Brain PowerPoint Body Language	PowerPoint Body Language	Body language Audience participation	Audio-visual tool Table PowerPoint
Structure	Personal anecdote	Personal Anecdote	Teaching	Sharing Opinion
Finale	"Going out on a limb"	Joke, punch-line	Lesson	Call for action