

**TED Talks on International Development:
Trans-Hegemonic Promise and Ritualistic Constraints**

Abstract

Despite their global popularity and relevance to Communication for Development (C4D), TED talks have not yet been systematically examined from the vantage point of C4D. We offer the first theoretical and empirical investigation of both the content and structure of talks on international development by leveraging definitions of C4D as well as literature on mediatization, rituals in international relations, and online activism. Our analysis suggests that TED talks succeed in disseminating ideas and sparking public interest. At the same time, they reflect institutionalized, corporatized modes of mass communication rooted in elitist discourses and practices. Contrary to popular perceptions, we therefore conclude that while TED talks are an effective vehicle for information dissemination, they are an unlikely catalyst for social change.

Key words

TED, Communication for Development (C4D), New Media and Social Change, Social Development, Political Economy, Globalization and the Media

Introduction

TED [Technology, Entertainment, Design] talks are short Internet-streamed presentations in which speakers address a gamut of scientific, technological, and cultural topics with the aim of “spreading ideas” (TED, 2014a). TED talks have been viewed by over one billion people globally and have become a key component of a new global communication landscape (Cadwalladr, 2011; Ferica, 2012; Sugimoto et al., 2013). The most popular talks have received 15-20 million views each and, for many, have become an “addiction” (Donovan, 2014). In a recent book on the TED phenomenon, Donovan (2014) relays the story of his twelve-year old daughter who is able to recite entire passages from talks that she found inspiring. Her father posits that the format of TED talks embodies the most effective contemporary modes of communication and thus maximizes speakers’ abilities to “mak[e] a difference in an ever-more crowded world” (Donovan, 2014; pp. 5-7) not only as potential TED presenters but also, crucially, as communicators more generally. In the realm of political theory and by way of responding to Friesen and Lowe (2012, p. 184; cf. Pickard, 2006), Banker (2013) has pointed to TED talks as a prime example of “inherently democratic” and open-access communication in the twenty-first century.

Others have been more critical. In a recent op-ed in *The Guardian*, Bratton (2013) posits that “science, philosophy and technology run on the model of American Idol [which] is a recipe for civilisational disaster.” TED talks epitomize oversimplification, according to the op-ed, and thus eclipse complex social, economic, cultural, and political realities. Another recent commentator seconded this concern by warning that “TED talks are lying to [us]” (Frank, 2013) through their promise of forward innovation and their power to suggest that their audiences find themselves “in the presence of something profound” (ibid.). Social change as portrayed in these talks is easy and fun and can be catalyzed by content broken down in a TED-like fashion, especially when such talks “go viral” on the Internet. Consumers of TED talks are thus depicted

as agents of “technological solutionism” (Morozov, 2013, pp. 5-9) where short-lived digital activism replaces sustained civic engagement.

At the same time, entrepreneurs, scholars, and practitioners strive to increase their visibility and impact beyond the confines of corporate meeting rooms, college campuses, and workshops. They are turning to social media in order to garner public attention (Bertram & Katti, 2013; Wernicke, 2011), and it seems fair to presume that there is a relationship between this trend and TED talks’ fast-growing popularity. TED, the organization behind the format, is sponsored by the Sapling Foundation. It offers so-called conference memberships at rates ranging from US\$4,250 to \$150,000 (TED, 2014a). While TED emphasizes its status as a non-profit organization (TED, 2014b), in 2011, it paid its five most senior employees seven-digit annual salaries (Segar, 2011). Aside from theoretical and political concerns, a comprehensive appraisal of TED talks in the context of C4D should therefore also include an inquiry into the economic dimension of these talks. Specifically, the emergence of new organizational hybrids based on proprietary platforms that connect for-profit with non-profit actors warrants critical attention.

Notwithstanding an emerging body of scholarship on the social, economic, cultural, and political implications of social media writ large (see Ahlquist, 2013 for an overview; Lievrouw, 2013; Waisbord, 2014), systematic research on TED talks and their resonance with existing communication theories is still in its infancy. To date, what does exist has focused on TED talks as an outlet for science communication or has relied almost exclusively on large-scale data mining and bibliometrics across disciplines (Sugimoto et al., 2013; Sugimoto & Thelwall, 2013) rather than focusing on specific societal challenges or scientific fields (cf. Ferica, 2012). As exemplified above, there is also a journalistic, pop-cultural critique that deserves to be mentioned here but that relies, naturally, on impressionistic instead of empirical insights. This article seeks to

close this gap through an empirical study of TED talks on international development, broadly defined.

Two main questions guide our analysis. First, we ask to what extent new types of media in the field of Communication for Development (C4D), in this case TED talks, can be analyzed through the lens of existing communication theories. In defining C4D, we note a diversity of definitional approaches that need to be factored into our analysis. One of the earliest definitions was developed in a series of publications by Everett Rogers (1969; 1974; 1976) in the context of modernization and development. Lennie and Tacchi summarize his definition as the “study of social change brought about communication research, theory and technologies, with development understood as a participatory process of social change” (2013, p. 5). This conceptualization is virtually identical with the one fielded by Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (1998), which is also applied by Quarry and Ramirez (2009). According to Servaes (1999, p. 89), C4D “moves the focus [...] from a ‘communicator’ to a more ‘receiver-centric’ orientation, with the resultant emphasis on meaning sought and ascribed rather than information transmitted. With this shift in focus, one is no longer attempting to create a need for the information one is disseminating, but one is rather disseminating information for which there is a need. [...] The emphasis is on information exchange rather than on persuasion [...]” All of these definitions thus emphasize a participatory dimension in bringing about social change.

Second, we ask whether the format and content of TED talks challenge existing discourses on international development knowledge and approaches or reaffirm them. We do so with a view to assessing TED talks’ potential to catalyze social change as part of what Polletta (2012, p. 47) refers to as the “development of protest forms, strategies, targets, and issues associated with the rise of new digital technologies [as a] new repertoire in the making.” We utilize keyword-based data mining as employed in comparable social media research but also delve more deeply into the

composition and dialectic of each TED talk included in our sample. This article thus adds two important new dimensions to the scholarly debate on digital communication. First, it focuses on a specific TED topic – international development – and analyzes the content of relevant talks comparatively. Second, it applies theoretical insights from communication theory to one of the pivotal new media today in order to assess the former’s explanatory power and to identify unresolved issues that deserve to be addressed through theoretical rethinking. Specifically, the research explores the extent to which TED popularize depoliticized representations of, and solutions to, international development challenges. At the same time, it gauges their trans-hegemonic and trans-ritual potential. We thus question the binary that to date characterizes critiques of TED talks, which pits accusations of reductionism and solutionism (Morozov, 2012, 2013) against arguments stressing their achievement of “popularizing research” (Sugimoto et al., 2013), from both empirical and theoretical angles.

[...]

Conclusion

Our research suggests that TED talks on international development are part and parcel of global processes of both mediatization and popularization of hitherto elitist policy discourses. At the same time, however, our analysis does not render compelling evidence in support of either extreme in the ongoing debate on the vices or virtues of TED talks as a medium. Nonetheless, C4D scholars and practitioners need to be aware of how TED talks blur the boundaries between profit and non-profit activities and thus help create a new hybrid market for “celebrity-academic-entrepreneur-innovators.” The capitalist logic underpinning the format is undeniable. By epitomizing mediatization and adopting franchising strategies not dissimilar to, say, *American Idol*, TED has likely already altered the global discussion around complex concepts such as “innovation,” “development,” and “poverty reduction” through simplified representations. Its

franchising strategy underscores the complex, maybe even paradoxical, aspect of the trans-hegemonic nature of TED talks that enable access for speakers from around the world, including the global South, but once again export a one-size-fits-all global model to a plethora of localized contexts. At this point in time, both a neoliberal turn towards more advertising of people, products, and services and the potential for meaningful global dialogues on innovation, failure, and social change communication are feasible, which calls for innovative C4D approaches to capture the critical potential embodied in TED talks as a medium of mass communication.

The broader issue highlighted by our research is that new media can and should be analyzed within existing frameworks of communication theory, media analysis, and C4D approaches, and that key concepts of communication theory are pivotal in understanding social change in the digital age. TED talks as a medium reflect what Couldry (2013, pp. 199-200), in his introduction to a special issue in *Communication Theory* and with reference to Thomas (1991), characterized as “multiple entanglements.” Media relate to social change through multiple “forms” and “logics,” but ultimately reinforce an underlying neoliberal ideology that places individual consumption over collective action. With the traditional media sector either struggling with or outrightly espousing “explicit neoliberal values and their wider corrosion of political life” (Couldry, 2010, p. 88), TED talks’ propensity to overcome such ideological frameworks and resulting institutions is arguably the most important aspect in the context of our TED-focused inquiry into communication for social change. TED talks, we find, remain focused on dissemination, not activism; they spread ideas, disconnected with social change. While we must not discard the possibility that their audiences contain members who eventually leverage insights gained from either participating or watching these talks for social change, TED talks themselves do not possess this catalytic function as did, for instance, Twitter in the context of the Arab revolution. Linking new media such as TED talks to communication theories helps us put claims about supposedly groundbreaking potential of these media for social change into historical and

critical perspective. Our findings indicate that structural issues undergirding current media discourses, from power to mediatization and ritual dynamics, are equally present in emergent forms of digital media. At the same time, our case draws attention to the problematic nature of hailing new technology as necessarily socially and politically transformative, such as in the context of the Arab Spring or the Kony 2012 Campaign. Our findings thus resonate with the sobering conclusions drawn in recent research on the role of “social media as gateways to civic engagement” conducted by Lewis, Gray and Meierhenrich (2014, p. 7) whose “analysis reveals an inverse relationship between broad online social movement mobilization and deep participation” (ibid.). The extent to which watching TED talks translates into action for or against the causes presented therein therefore constitutes a promising area for future studies in the field of “social change communication” (Tufté, 2014). Past debates in C4D should caution us against the assumption that societal transformation results from more accessible, shared and consumed media. A recent TED talk held at Drexel University, hijacked by comedian Sam Hyde who delivered a senseless rant about topics ranging from peacebuilding in Mogadishu to harvesting chestnuts, only began to puzzle the audience when the prankster asked them to physically pat themselves on their own backs (Petri, 2013). Or, as Tacchi put it:

We learned [...] that finding ways to give voice to a range of people through traditional and new media technologies does not necessarily mean that the listening end of the equation will simply fall into place even if engaging content is produced (Tacchi, 2012, p. 228).

It behooves scholars of international development and communication alike to identify more effective gateways for incursions into hegemonic structures as opposed to betting on the next technological tool or platform promising structural change through visual consumption.

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