

# Academics should stop being so snuffy about TED

Giving short online talks for a general audience offers benefits for individuals, subjects and the entire profession, says Kristen Sadler

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By [Kristen Sadler](#) ([/author/kristen-sadler](#))

TED polarises the academic community. When academics hear that I attend the TED conference and organise TEDx events, they usually can't resist sharing their thoughts about this online, cross-disciplinary gorilla in the learning landscape.

Supporters enthusiastically recommend favourite talks, whereas detractors see TED talks as excessively numerous, lacking in technical detail and not worthy of the popularity that they often enjoy.

The TED talk library is the core of TED's success. More than 3,000 talks are available online for free. The annual conference generates about 80 talks and others are added from the separate TEDx programme, an avenue for learning, sharing and connecting in real life. For those privileged with abundant learning opportunities, this endeavour may seem unnecessary. However, thousands of people around the world place enormous value in the opportunity to further their understanding of themselves, their communities and their world.



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The most popular talks have more than 40 million views. The reasons for that popularity relate to numerous factors in addition to their content, including flow, personal connection, personality or a moment of authenticity. The aim is to pique interest and deliver a memorable message to a broad audience. Along with emotional connection, brevity is a key ingredient: talks last only up to 18 minutes. There simply isn't enough time for the kind of technicality that usually characterises academic presentations, so the audiences are potentially quite different.

That is borne out by the fact that giving a TED talk appears to have (<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0062403>) no effect on citations, according to a 2013 study (<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0062403>) in *Plos One*. But the TED brand now has the power to propel an individual into popular culture and a position of influence – all in the time it takes to make a coffee.

Of course, that can provoke jealousy; in my experience, junior colleagues and perceived competitors elicit the strongest negative reactions. This is understandable when most academic reward systems are individualistic. Missing a chance for such a high level of personal impact can be aggravating. But I nudge friends who feel this way to develop their own public communication strategies and to champion any team member – maybe a graduate student or research fellow – willing and able to boost the group's social media presence. Connecting with non-experts requires a certain skill set, and while it comes naturally to some, others must learn the art.

Many TED speakers fit the generic academic mould: established experts who share the fruit of their sometimes decades-long contribution to one particular field. This is immensely valuable; the greater the awareness of the challenges and possibilities in a field, the greater the chance of cross-disciplinary solutions and progress towards goals.

But it often takes disrupters to put the disparate pieces of the puzzle together. Such people also abound on TED, seemingly appearing out of nowhere, merging ideas from various fields, and/or entering intellectual realms where they have no track records. This can be conceptually difficult for some academics to comprehend, but providing an opportunity for innovators to articulate fresh theories, nascent ideas and newly identified problems is valuable – and perhaps reminiscent of a bygone academic era. To TED, it is the idea that counts, not who generates it.

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Speakers are responsible for accuracy, but TED provides guidelines on science standards. TED staff also select conference topics and speakers, while talks for TEDx events (the best of which are added to the TED library) are selected by volunteers. Countless hours are spent researching topics and searching for speakers through nominations, open mic nights and networks. Finding expert academics is made more difficult by the fact that many journals are still not open access and many academics don't make information about their work available in a public-friendly format.

Furthermore, TEDx organisers worldwide have shared with me that working with academic speakers can be tough. They often resist feedback about content, don't respect practice schedules and disregard advice from speaker coaches. As a last resort, organisers rescind invitations when the potential speaker is not open to the process, but these obdurate individuals also harm the reputation of academic speakers in general, and decrease the chance of others being invited.

The relationship between TED and the academy has delivered benefits for both parties, perhaps by chance rather than by design. A more productive relationship is possible, however. TED and its audience would gain more content, and academics would gain a wider and more diverse following, not only for themselves but also for their subjects and their profession. There are many ways for academics to further those more collegiate aims beyond giving a talk. They could submit speaker and idea nominations, join a TEDx speaker selection or fact-checker team, or even start a TEDx team in their own community.

TED talks have already been online for almost 15 years. Soon, early career academics will only know life with TED talks as part of their learning journey. It is crucial that the academy should acknowledge and seize the benefits of this – and prevent the cynics from diminishing the opportunities for everyone else.

**Kristen Sadler is a TED attendee and TEDx licensee. Until 2018, she was research director for strategy and biosciences in the President's Office of Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/nanyang-technological-university-singapore>).**

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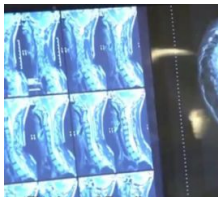


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