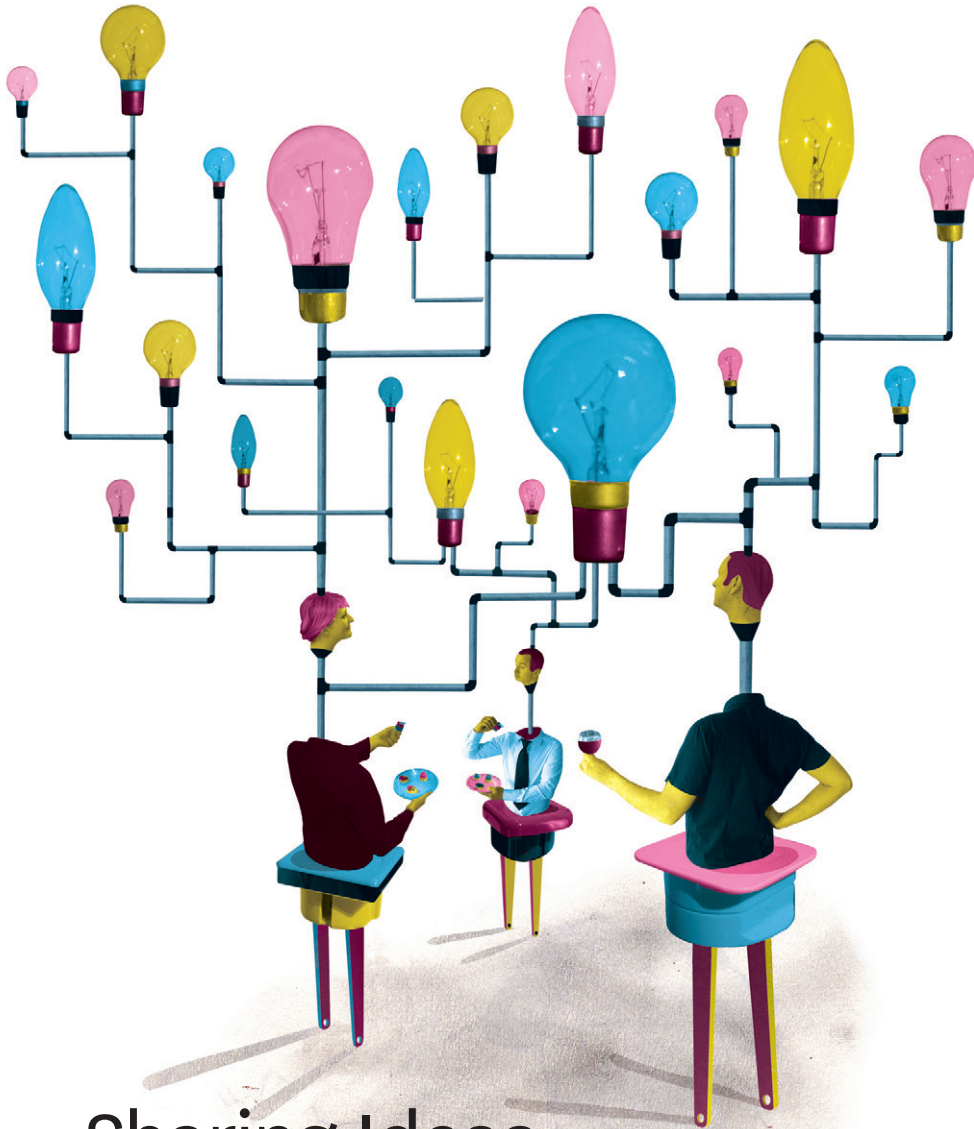


# Synthesis

A review of emerging ideas in the media



## Sharing Ideas And Hors d'Oeuvres

Are high-end conferences like TED worth it?  
by Jimmy Guterman

For decades, Richard Saul Wurman was the man in charge of TED, the pricey, invitation-only annual event where leaders in technology, business, entertainment, and design meet to trade ideas, make deals, and feel elite. He thought it up; he turned it into a must-go for a generation of inventors, disrupters, and corporate moguls; and, at a time when the event seemed past its peak, in

post-dot-com 2001, Wurman sold it to a nonprofit foundation for a reported eight-figure price.

It's September 2010, and Wurman is onstage at BIF (Business Innovation Factory), another three-letter-acronym event held in Providence, Rhode Island, that follows the TED playbook: austere yet dramatic talks celebrating brilliance and iconoclasm, a mix of A-list speakers

and unknown wonders, plenty of rhetoric about changing the world. Wurman is there, it seems, to drizzle some cynicism on these earnest proceedings.

Although TED has been more successful than ever in recent years under the direction of media entrepreneur (not editor in chief of *Wired*) Chris Anderson, Wurman seems to think it is broken. With amiable narcissism, he argues that TED's 18-minute talk format has become "ungenuine"; that the quality of attendees has declined ("There's always a seat for someone who's famous or rich enough"); and that a recent proliferation of independently produced TEDx events (Disclosure: I am a producer of one) has led to "a lot of very amateur stuff." He says emphatically: "What I created I need to destroy now."

It's easy to dismiss Wurman's crankiness, but it makes one wonder: Are the big idea-sharing events—not only TED but also its geopolitical cousin, the World Economic Forum, and even once-hip/now-mainstream industry conferences such as South by Southwest and the Sundance Film Festival—still living up to their promise? As they become more popular, do they become less interesting? Can they be elite and democratic at the same time? Can they retain an aura of specialness while simultaneously pursuing a strategy of ubiquity?

When I began attending TED, in 1997, it was hard to find information about the event. Although it was well established by that time, it still felt like a secret. Its website was purposefully light on information, and what happened in the halls of the Monterey Convention Center stayed in Monterey. No more. While the entrance fee for the main event, now held in Long Beach, California, every February, remains staggering (starting at \$6,000 yet selling out more than a year in advance), it is difficult for anyone interested in ideas to avoid TED. In addition to hundreds of local TEDx's, there are now several other large TED events and more than 800 free "TEDTalk" videos available on the website. Despite its elitist core, the organization



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promotes "ideas worth spreading" and is determined to be as democratic as its business model allows it to be.

So TED is no longer an exclusive club when it comes to engaging with the broader organization or the ideas presented. But what about getting access to fellow attendees? As Matt Ridley put it so

## "What I created I need to destroy now."

Richard Saul Wurman, creator of TED, a must-go for a generation of inventors, disrupters, and corporate moguls

trenchantly at a TED event in Oxford, England, last year, TED is "where ideas have sex." It's where smart people meet other smart people and wind up collaborating on everything from predicting the next internet trend to distributing vaccines in Africa more effectively. You're more likely to get Bill Gates's attention by speaking to him in the buffet line than by calling the Gates Foundation and asking if the boss is in. Even a wallflower will emerge from these conferences with a richer collection of contacts. This is as true now as it was when I started attending. I've had interesting discussions with and heard impressive talks from former Nigerian finance minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and novelist Kurt Andersen, astronomer Carolyn Porco and musician David Byrne. I've stood next to basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and asked dumb questions of both a Nobel laureate and an Academy Award-winning actress.

What about the ideas themselves? Regardless of how widely they're eventually disseminated, are these concepts that will "change the world"—Anderson's oft-stated goal? Many of them should, but do they? There's no question that TED is a tremendous intellectual party, and its director has a curator's instinct for unexpectedly brilliant combinations. But it's hard to think of an idea born or developed at any of its events that has been a real game changer. (Yes, Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*,

which began its life as a TEDTalk, was a hit. But what exactly has it changed?) The biggest news out of last year's TED was not any of its ideas (one of the speakers, biochemist Mark Roth, presented evidence backing up his claim to have conquered death via suspended animation) but a minor controversy surrounding the typically provocative performance of comedian Sarah Silverman. A regional website's coverage of a recent TEDx appeared not in its news section but in its style section.

Other high-end conferences face similar issues. The World Economic Forum used to be a group of wonks working on policy; now it's a place to see Bono. Sundance used to be a magnet for truly independent filmmakers; now it is part of the major studios' launch strategies. Yet these events still serve a purpose. Even without the celebrity guests, they remain supreme networking extravaganzas. They continue to be a place for the cross-pollination of thoughtful (and sometimes groundbreaking) ideas. TED, more than the others, is still a place to find education and surprise—not only for the elites at the main event but also, once the talks migrate to the web, for the broader public.

Back onstage in Providence, Richard Saul Wurman looks at the audience and says, "You are all stupid." The audience is quiet except for a bit of nervous laughter, but Wurman means it as a compliment, not an epithet—an argument that even elitists should welcome every talk with a beginner's mind. He adds: "What a joy not to know something and slowly fill it in." When he ran TED, that was what he hoped those attending would feel as well, and Chris Anderson's goals are similar: to help us all learn something and act on it. At a time when businesspeople and politicians pretend that they have it all figured out, ongoing education may be the greatest idea worth spreading. ♥

 **Jimmy Guterman** is a senior editor at *Harvard Business Review*.



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