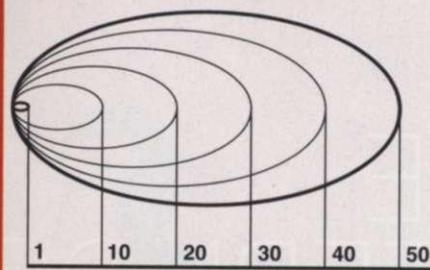


PLANET TEDx

TED was one of the world's most elite gatherings. Then they franchised it to everyone, for free. How TEDx is flooding the globe with big ideas.

BY BILL WASIK
MAP BY C2F

Number of TEDx conferences



Year

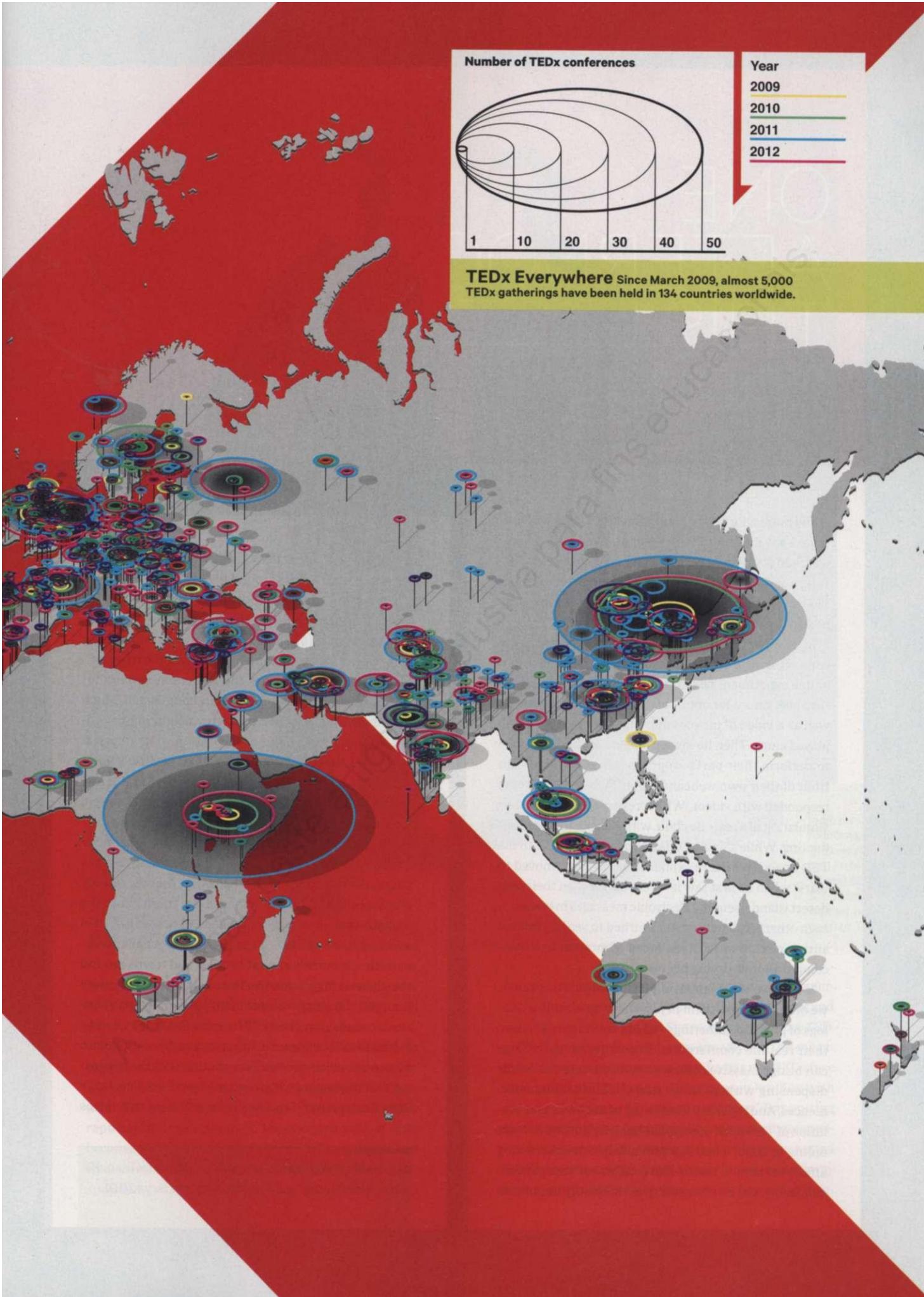
2009

2010

2011

2012

TEDx Everywhere Since March 2009, almost 5,000 TEDx gatherings have been held in 134 countries worldwide.



ONE AFTERNOON THIS PAST SPRING,

at the public library on Main Street in Bozeman, Montana, I sat in a room with 10 or so other people and watched a video projected on a screen. It was a TED Talk: a speech given the previous March at the annual TED conference in Long Beach, California, and then posted to the organization's website, TED.com.

In the video, Eric Whitacre, a classical composer and conductor with blond surfer-dude hair, describes an online experiment he'd recently carried out. He posted the sheet music for one of his popular choral works, as well as a video of him conducting the work as a piano played along. Then he invited singers around the globe to perform their parts—soprano, alto, tenor, bass—in front of their own webcams. After hundreds of people responded with videos, Whitacre arranged them into a simulation of a real-life choir, with himself in front conducting. While showing this odd choral facsimile to the TED crowd, Whitacre explains that he was "moved to tears" when he first saw it—these singers "on their own desert islands, sending electronic messages in bottles to each other." At that moment I turned to see the woman sitting next to me, a stern-faced Montanan in a dust-colored anorak, drying her own eyes.

When we think about digital communities today, we often visualize them in just this way, as online analogs of physical gatherings—as improvements, even, on their real-life counterparts, since Internet gatherings can bridge massive distances at minuscule cost while dispensing with all those sticky real-world inconveniences. And indeed, it's tempting to see the recent evolution of TED itself in a similar light: By putting its talks online in 2006, what was previously a members-only affair—an annual Davos-like conclave of wealthy Silicon Valley and Hollywood types—suddenly became an

enormous and almost democratic cultural force, reaching millions of viewers around the world.

The move online has undeniably transformed TED (the letters stand for Technology, Entertainment, Design) from a conference company into something more like a media company. Increasingly, the true audience for TED Talks is not the in-person throng but people staring at screens far from Long Beach. Much as we now use the word *crowd* (crowdsourcing, crowdfunding) to liken online collaboration to its physical analog, it's tempting to consider TED, like Eric Whitacre's choir, as a conference in a primarily virtual sense, with million-strong bleacherfuls of disembodied viewers twinkling in and out behind the real-life back row.

The truth, however, is far more interesting. Free online access is just one of two major initiatives that TED has undertaken to engage a wider audience. The other is fully physical and has equally changed the character of the organization. That initiative, called TEDx, began in 2008 as a way to bring TED-like gatherings to smaller communities. It quickly spread to cities and towns around the globe—1,300 so far, in 134 countries, hosting more than 800,000 people in total, many times more than have ever attended an official TED event. The video viewing I attended at the Bozeman library was not some random screening; it was an overflow simulcast of the inaugural TEDxBozeman, which had sold out its tickets in six days. Each event is required to show at least two videos

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In Bozeman, Montana, the local TEDx is run by Ken Fichtler (left), 27, and Danny Schotthoefer, 31. Neither has ever been to TED.

from TED.com, but the rest of the speakers are in person, often local, creating a TED-style experience for places where "ideas conference" isn't even part of the lexicon.

TED does place some restrictions on the independent organizers. The TEDx logo renders the x like an asterisk, with a tagline below that reads "x = independently organized TED event." But in practice, TED has put its entire reputation in the hands of these organizers, if only because they're so entrepreneurial and so plugged into their communities. These local showrunners recruit speakers unknown to TED central and coach them on

how to present their ideas. The resulting one-day conferences draw huge crowds. For most of the world now, and even for most of the United States, these events *are* TED.

Chris Anderson (no relation to the editor of this magazine), a former media executive who has run TED since 2001, sees both TEDx and TED.com as in keeping with a larger philosophy of "radical openness." But putting media online is a standard practice, whereas these satellite events have taken Anderson into entirely uncharted territory: He has given his nationally known brand away to thousands of complete unknowns, spawning inde-

pendent TED events in cities and towns all around the world. Can "big ideas" really cover that much ground?

OVERSIGHT OF THIS UNPRECEDENTED EXPERIMENT HAS been entrusted to Lara Stein, 46, a genial yet commanding South African who works out of TED's headquarters in Lower Manhattan. After moving to the United States as a college student to study dance, Stein wound up staying on and becoming a successful entertainment executive while still in her twenties; she worked stints at Boston public TV station WGBH, at the Lifetime cable network, and at Microsoft, where she was instrumental in launching its short-lived Microsoft Multimedia Productions in 1996. Along the way, she developed a deep devotion to TED, attending six times during the 1990s and never looking back. "I wouldn't take a job unless they'd agree to send me," she says with a laugh.

Beyond her management experience and her TED bona fides, there's a curious theme to Stein's resume that makes her particularly suited to ride herd as director of TEDx—and that also helps to explain the surprisingly expansive path the program has taken. One of Stein's first jobs in Hollywood was at the animation company Nelvana, where she was responsible for licensing such properties as the Care Bears, Babar, and Tales From the Cryptkeeper, working out agreements to make anything from socks to shirts to DVDs. Eventually she moved over to Marvel Comics to work in a similar capacity. This experience seems to have greatly influenced the relationship between TED and its TEDx organizers. The creators of the satellite conferences aren't volunteers; they're *licensees*, who are given latitude to put together events on their own terms, including (with permission) the ability to accept sponsorships and to charge admission of up to \$100 per ticket for recouping costs.

It's impossible to overstate how much this autonomy, this sense of ownership, has shaped the evolution of TEDx. Reading the CVs of organizers, and especially meeting them in person, one finds they have a very different character from the volunteer coordinators or open source contributors of the world. Instead, they're wheeler-dealer types: entrepreneurs, marketing consultants, supreme self-branders, the sorts of people who intuitively understand how running a TED-style event in their local community might serve not merely to educate that community but also to win considerable influence for them within it. "You talk to them," Stein says, "and they're all like mini-Chrises"—miniature versions of Chris Anderson.

The ground rules for the organizers are fairly simple. First they need to apply for a license under a unique name. Having other TEDxes established in your city

is no obstacle: San Francisco, for example, has more than 15 licensees within the city limits, from TEDxPresidio to TEDxMission. Manhattan has more than 30. Stein estimates that she receives 120 applications per week, of which she rejects only around 30 percent. Once approved, the licensee (or licensees—many TEDxes are run by small groups) is free to program the event as they wish, with a few basic restrictions. One fundamental rule, true of TED as well, is that no sponsors are allowed to display logos onstage, and no one, neither sponsor nor speaker, is allowed to sell anything during the performance. Organizers who have been to TED can sell as many tickets as they like, but everyone else has to limit their crowds to 100 people.

In practice, the message that these are independently run events is often lost. One TEDx organizer in Kansas City tells the story of a passerby who saw her tote bag from an official TED conference and wondered aloud why she hadn't gotten one too: Hadn't she been to TED herself, just the other week? Stein and her crew have designed the program and its branding to balance exactly, perhaps uncomfortably, on this knife-edge of misperception. But it's a balance that works, because it allows the online talks and the real-world offshoots to feed off one another. The TED Talk phenomenon online has primed the audience, but it's also clear, based on the demand, that the online talks simply aren't enough. When TED comes to their town, people want to go see it in the flesh.



WHY DO AUDIENCES NEED TEDx when they have TED.com? That is, at a time when we can get the best of everything remotely, what's the point of having in-person events? The opportunity to shake real people's hands, get drunk with them, perhaps hook up with them, all on the corporate expense account—no doubt those motivations can explain the ongoing appeal of, say, South by Southwest or various other

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industry-wide bacchanals. But they're hardly the prime motivator to attend TEDx events, strictly one-day conferences that happen right in your hometown. For the most part the audiences come, watch, and leave. If they were looking for an injection of TED-like "big ideas," they'd have been far better off perusing TED.com. Yet the crowds flock to TEDx events, and the organizers vie to put them on at zero profit. Why?

A professor of strategy and innovation at London's Cass Business School, Joseph Lampel is one of the few academics who study conferences and in-person gatherings. In collaboration with Alan Meyer of the University of Oregon, he has developed a phrase—*field-configuring event*—to

A 2011 TEDxBloomington talk by Charlie Todd of Improv Everywhere has gotten nearly 1.4 million views; in 2012 he was invited to TED.



describe the role that gatherings play in the information age. A few years back, the two men edited a special issue of the *Journal of Management Studies* to show the breadth of the concept. Papers from scholars in very different disciplines all used this same basic idea to discuss the importance of physical gatherings in fields from literature to medicine to politics. Despite the fact that these fields all have their own media (trade journals, newsletters, etc.) to inform them, the gatherings cut through the flurry of information to set priorities, to confer status, to codify collective judgments.

The Internet has made it easier for people to exchange views and information. But since it lets everyone seek out just the media they want, Lampel says, the Internet has actually made it harder for people from different niches to get on the same page. At a basic level, the physicality of conferences acts as a sort of brute-force filter: Not only is the programming relatively limited compared with the infinite buffet of the online world, but the relatively high switching costs (getting up from

your chair, walking across a convention center) mean you wind up listening to—and drawing unexpected inspiration from—talks you might otherwise have chosen to miss. Physical gatherings help to focus our minds by monopolizing our attention, by curtailing our choices. "The Internet is not good at allowing for what I call the predictable unpredictability," Lampel says.

In Lampel and Meyer's view, the "fields" that events help configure can also include a city's conception of itself. A classic example in this regard is the Olympics. One paper in their special issue, by Boston College professor Mary Ann Glynn, described the role that the 1996 Summer Games played in the economic development efforts of Atlanta. Hosting the games helped reconfigure the power relationships in the region in fascinating ways—local business executives, by stepping up to support the bid early on, wound up benefiting later through the connections they made with the corporations that come in as sponsors and organizers. Being home to an Olympics really does tend to establish or cement a city's world-class status, to outsiders and (perhaps more important) to insiders.

TEDx is hardly the Olympics, of course, but it can play a notably similar role at a far smaller expense. It's a special event that comes to town and focuses everyone—organizers, local businesses and media, the audience—on the town's own talent, its potential, its shared sense of itself.

TWO DAYS BEFORE TEDXBOZEMAN, THE CORE volunteers meet at the offices of Classic Ink, a local design and marketing agency, to discuss final preparations. It's an enthusiastic bunch, though they don't hide how harried they are; staggering in late, they slouch wearily down on an L-shaped sectional with the righteous air of the overworked and unpaid. "Next year, we should start eight months ahead of time," grouses Steve Spence, a master's student in film from Ireland who's coordinating all the A/V for the event.

Most of the volunteers present are, like Spence, twentysomethings with some connection to the flagship campus of Montana State University, which is located here in Bozeman. The license holders both fit that description, though they're a bit of an odd couple. The straitlaced one is Ken Fichtler, a 27-year-old Montana native who studied business management at MSU and now works in marketing at nearby Lattice Materials, which sells silicon and germanium to manufacturers; his unpredictable foil is Danny Schotthoefer, 31, who works at Classic Ink as an interactive marketing coordinator.

If Fichtler's path, as an up-and-coming marketing pro out of the local univer-



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sity, represents a very typical one toward becoming a TEDx organizer, Schotthoefer's has been an unlikely journey indeed. A troubled and low-achieving high school student in Oregon, he considered seminary after graduation but joined the Navy instead. He wound up working 17-hour days on an aircraft carrier as an ordnanceman, loading bombs and missiles into F-18 Hornets. After his military commitment ran out in 2004, he went to school to be an ad copywriter, only to find, on graduation, that the recession had made jobs in traditional advertising nearly nonexistent. So he started getting interested in social media; after relocating with his fiancée and infant daughter to Bozeman in 2008, he began working odd stints at two digital agencies in town: 8 am to 5 pm at one, 5:30 pm to 7:30 pm at the other. When a friend from high school grabbed the license for TEDx-Boulder, Schotthoefer set his sights on bringing it to Bozeman. He signed up Ken and then scoped out a venue and started lining up speakers. The two set only one requirement: All the speakers needed to have some deep connection to Montana.

Looking at a small community through a TEDx lens can be a genuinely transformative act. That's especially true in college towns like Bozeman, those minor cities with not-quite-elite universities, places where the most ambitious collegians leave after graduation and the most ambitious high schoolers head to college someplace else entirely. At a time when the Internet lets you get your ideas from anywhere, it's easy for locals to slip into thinking their hometown is not so very far from nowhere. But actually stop to think about individual people in your town—professors, entrepreneurs, advocates—who do important work and think important thoughts, and sud-

denly your perspective changes. Go on to imagine 20 of those people together in a room and your nowhere can begin to look like somewhere very interesting.

Schotthoefer, Fichtler, and crew approached their task as just that kind of dinner party. They asked David Sands, an MSU plant pathologist, to discuss the possible role of bacteria as a cause of rain. They brought on Florence Dunkel, an entomologist, to speak about the nutritional, environmental, and culinary arguments for eating bugs—or, as she calls them, "land shrimp." From Missoula came the University of Montana's Jakki Mohr, who studies how biological innovations can be applied to human organizations. From the local high schools came a talk about educational gamification from a science teacher and two short, deeply personal talks from students. A few entrepreneurs kicked in addresses about their ideas and ventures: a locally sourced construction firm, an ail-American T-shirt company.

The live audience was just 100 people, many of whom the organizers knew. But there were three simulcast locations, at the public library (where I would walk over to watch the third of the day's four sessions), at MSU, and at Bozeman High School. Plus, there was streaming video, available anywhere in the world but aimed at Montanans in other cities, who might tune in to watch their own "local" talent. Then there were the videos of the talk, which would get uploaded to YouTube. And there was always a chance that a TEDxBozeman video might wind up on TED.com. That initial local audience could hypothetically turn very, very big—and that potentiality can make all the difference to how speakers see their role.

AT THE APPOINTED HOUR, TEDXBOZEMAN DID start off a tad bit wobbly. Schotthoefer's opening remarks were tense as he barked to the crowd to move forward and fill in the empty seats. Volunteers ran up and down the aisles like maniacs even as the program was beginning. But the crowd moved up, the speakers spoke, and everyone seemed to leave happy, including me. It was a classic case of predictable unpredictability: I wouldn't have clicked a link to watch many of these talks, at least not based on a short description, but being *obliged* to watch them—trusting the organizers that these speakers would tell me

something about Montana, and also something about the world—there were few I wasn't glad to have seen.

When you think about "big ideas" from the top down, as a lucrative industry of never-ending thought provocation, an obvious critique suggests itself: How big can all these ideas really be? How many big ideas are there, anyway? Scanning through isolated videos on TED.com, one can undeniably find some cravenness at play, as all those CEOs, self-styled gurus, and lecture-circuit fixtures spin out their sometimes vacuous bits of ideation.

But consider the TEDx process from the bottom up and it's impossible not to admire what it can coax out of speakers who are far from the lecture circuit. "There's this massive battle for the world's attention," says Chris Anderson in response to TED's critics. "Many of the world's best ideas sit there unknown, ignored because people don't know how to communicate them. Is a TED Talk the same as a scientific paper? Of course it's not. But is it 'dumbed down'? No, it's not that either. People who say TED Talks are 'too emotional' are confused about the emotion that's at play. The emotion that works is *passion*. You can't communicate an idea unless you show that it matters to you."

It's telling, the ways in which the spirit of the TEDx experiment has seeped out into the rest of the organization. In 2013, half the speakers on the main stage at TED will be programmed through a talent search, fed by tryouts in 14 TEDx-style events on six different continents. For all the inherent elitism of the "thought-leader conference" as a concept, TED is genuinely trying to broaden its pool of thinkers—off and on the stage. And the way it's accomplishing that is by opening stages all around the world.

As gauzy as this may sound, there really is some idea that underpins whatever it is that each of us does, and there's some narrative (whether our own or someone else's) that helps convey it to others. By bringing speakers out of their specialties, by teaching them to talk to everyone, TEDxes are helping speakers connect with audiences, and helping audiences in turn to connect ideas inside their own minds. That is, they're adding to our store of stories—and it's hard to think of a much better reason to get together than that.