



Notes From TED ... A Recap of Last Week's Conference in Vancouver

By Dev Patnaik

In 40 years, TED evolved from just a conference to the media powerhouse it is today. In this article, Dev Patnaik shares notable speakers and takeaways from TED 2024 and explains why the experience can be especially transformative for future-focused leaders of strategy and innovation.

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Before TED was a global phenomenon, it was just a conference.

The architect Richard Saul Wurman started TED in 1984 as a way to bring together a few hundred technology and entertainment executives in California through design. Over the next forty years, the conference evolved into the media powerhouse it is today. Along the way, the topics covered expanded to be about everything from AI to universal basic income to climate change. TED's slogan summed up this expanded domain; no longer just about technology, entertainment and design, TED became about "Ideas worth spreading." On any given day, an average of 1.5 million people watch a TED Talk online.

And while you can see all the speakers online for free, I've attended TED in person for the past 18 years. (Okay, I skipped a few when my kids were young...) After all, watching the talks is just part of the reason to go. The lectures themselves serve as a spark to amazing conversations with some of the world's brightest minds. And besides... when am I going to get the time to watch a week's worth of TED talks online?

TED creates a space to temporarily ignore the distractions of the present. It's a place to be future-focused. If you're a leader of strategy or innovation, the experience can be especially transformative. As Larry Page once pointed out, the single biggest reason that companies fail is because they miss the future. I know because I heard him say it on the TED stage.

Ideas Change Everything

For its fortieth anniversary, the team at TED decided to change its slogan. The new tagline is "Ideas change everything." It demonstrates their commitment to celebrating the impact that all ideas can have. Not just progressive ideas. Not just conservative ones. And not just ideas that don't make us uncomfortable. It would be impossible for me to adequately summarize everything I learned. After all, last week's lineup offered 84 speakers back-to-back. Instead, here are ten talks that I think deserve particular attention. You'll be able to stream them for free in the coming weeks.

1. Microsoft AI CEO **Mustafa Suleyman** explained how AI represents a "new digital species" and will shape the future. His talk was equal parts grandiosity and common sense. And yet, as I watched it, I got this strange feeling that, in ten years, I'd be telling people that I was in the room when he first presented it. For reasons that might turn out to be very good or very bad.
2. UCSD Economics professor **Karthik Muralidharan** discussed how governments can find inspiration from the private sector to use data and experimentation and find better solutions to large social problems. I got to spend time with Karthik and he's a first-rate intellect. He also has a new book out that is the size and weight of an Italian sports car.
3. **Pete Stavros** is the head of Global Private Equity at KKR. He gave a talk on the value of employee stock ownership. If you asked me which talk would bring more of us to tears, I wouldn't have expected it to be the one by the KKR guy. And yet Pete spoke with a moral clarity that was the most inspiring thing I heard all week.
4. Harvard astronomer **Avi Loeb** has been in the news lately for his assertion that an interstellar object may actually be a UFO. His talk was less about that, and more of a call for science to return to a stance of curiosity and humility. UFOs might seem outlandish to some, but we need to learn new things based on evidence, not prejudice.
5. Many of us who listen to **Scott Galloway's** podcasts know that he has a big brain. Last week, we saw his big heart. Scott asked us a simple question: Do we love our children? If so, we shouldn't be complicit in the massive transfer of wealth from the young to the old, as we strip out investments in education and home ownership to give Social Security to people like me who probably won't need it.
6. Former presidential candidate **Andrew Yang** convinced us that non-partisan primaries and ranked-choice voting are reforms we need to make for elected representatives to be accountable for more of their constituents. Andrew has a beautiful style that says, "forget about me, here are the facts..."
7. **Gabrielle Rifkind** is Director of the Oxford Process for War Resolution. She taught us that war is not inevitable. It's something we choose. She shared ideas for using mass psychology and geopolitics to prevent or at least mitigate global

conflicts. Don't let Gabrielle's chic style and highfalutin accent fool you. Her ideas are radical and subversive. And desperately needed.

8. **Isaac Saul** of Tangled News talked about how the language we use drives us to identify with one tribe and hate another. He offered practical advice for reducing polarization. For instance, Tangled avoids both "illegal alien" and "undocumented immigrant" in favor of "unauthorized migrant."
9. Evolutionary Biologist **Carole Hooven** taught us how hormones like testosterone create different behaviors in different sexes. Her work got her branded as transphobic by the Office for DEI and she left Harvard. Carole's story was a painful illustration of how wokeism and cancel culture have undermined universities' quest for scientific truth.
10. **Alex Luebke** and his partner **Vivek Khumbari** demonstrated their PillBot, a tiny capsule that's a robot you can steer with a game controller. The PillBot provides an affordable alternative to invasive procedures like endoscopies. Alex swallowed one onstage so we could take a tour of his stomach. Alex is both a genius and a maniac. I should know. He's my girlfriend's brother.

There was so much more this year, including quantum computing, liquid neural networks, nuclear fusion, quadratic funding and even more AI. What's clear is that the future is coming even faster than we thought.

Everything Changes Ideas

Every TED Talk is individually fascinating. However, the real value comes from the overall patterns and shifts that are noticeable when you connect each talk and compare them from previous years. For instance, TED has long been optimistic about the promise of technology. One could even argue that the organization falls into sycophancy. It was therefore notable when the mood shifted a few years back and both speakers and participants were wondering openly if social media was good for our children, let alone our democracy. Ideas do change everything. But shifting conditions also change how we think about ideas. Here are a few trends I noticed this year...

1. Artificial Intelligence has come mainstream.

Last year's TED conference happened just months after OpenAI released Chat GPT. We all knew the world would never be the same. Would it create a new paradise on Earth? Or would we be enslaved to our robot overlords? Surprisingly, this year's TED lacked both the wonder and terror of last year. So maybe we've all agreed that it's going to be just fine? I'm not so sure...

2. Different horses for different courses.

This year's conference provided a tour of not only a variety of AI applications, but also a variety of AIs. From liquid neural networks to agentic AI, TED was abuzz with types of AI that are quite different from Large Language Models. It turns out that the kind of AI that picks a restaurant for you likely won't be the kind of AI that drives you there.

3. The pendulum on progress is swinging.

Wokeism may have reached its logical conclusion. Just as we've learned to question the promise of technology, we've become more skeptical about progressive causes. Again and again, there are mentions of progressive instincts moving into totalitarianism. Yes, many of us like social progress. But we're not ready to throw out science, free speech and other gifts of the Enlightenment.

4. A hunger for wisdom.

TED continues to be an impressive display of human intellect. And a surprising vacuum for human wisdom. The more we see about what humanity *can* do, the more I was forced to question what humanity *should* do. In particular, there was one idea that didn't get its invitation to the conference: compassion. Not caring. Not kindness. Not empathy. But a true and clear understanding of our common humanity, one that transcends intellect, identity or condition. Next year's TED conference is entitled "Humanity Reimagined." I can only hope that compassion makes the agenda.

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