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ANALYSIS OF ONLINE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL LANGUAGE PROGRAMS – TED AS AN EXAMPLE

Li Yincen (a), Zhao Yueyang (b)*
*Corresponding author

(a) Sungkyunkwan University, 25-2, Sungkyunkwan-Ro, Jongno-Gu, Seoul, Korea, IvanLee0210@163.com
(b) Gachon University, 1342 Seongnamdaero, Sujeong-Gu, Seongnam-Si, Gyeonggi-Do, Korea,
772511022@qq.com

Abstract

TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) is an online social and educational language program, TED is mainly broadcast in the form of lectures for audiences around the world, so that many people living in the online environment, in the era of fragmentation and pan-entertainment can also get scientific education and space to think. TED was first created in early 1984, and began to flourish in 2000. The networked broadcast of the program in 2017 brought the program to its pinnacle. This paper analyses TED's overall framework process, speaker selection and its value embodiment, language form, and program broadcast format from TED's program content and program features, exploring TED's advantages and features, and pointing out its shortcomings and improvement suggestions. At the same time, the value and public attention of the TED program is analysed through data. The analysis shows that audiences do not choose to give up the program because of its weak entertainment, reflecting the public's desire for knowledge and rational judgment today, and reminding the urgent need to produce more programs like TED. In addition, this paper points out that online social and educational language programs have useful ideas for China, that is using language programs as a bridge to carry a platform for spreading Chinese language and Chinese culture and promoting it to the world.

Keywords: TED, Online Social and Educational Language Programs, Online Variety, Media Communication

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction of the Name and Concept of TED

TED, as it is officially called, is a combination of three acronyms, the letter T stands for "Technology", the letter E stands for "Entertainment" and the letter D stands for "Design". The values and philosophy explained by the combination are to spread the program that integrate Technology and Design with Entertainment functions. The simple three words represent a wide range of fields, together shaping and influencing our future development. As the slogan and the main theme of the program – "Ideas Worth Spreading", in the TED program videos, the topics cover all aspects of society, such as science, culture, technology, design, entertainment, etc. They are presented as an 18-minute lectures, which are socially educational and entertaining.

1.2. The Inception and Origin of TED

TED is different from other types of network programs. As shown on TED (TED Conferences, n.d.), it is based in New York on the East Coast of the United States and Vancouver, Canada. But in its earliest days, it was not planned, organized and broadcast by a media company. TED was founded in the United States on February 23rd, 1984. And now it has been 33 years since it was founded by Richard Saul Wurman in a private non-profit organization. The organization is best known as the sponsor of the TED Conference, an International conference held annually in Monterey, California, that invited thought leaders and doers from all around the world to share what they are most familiar with and most passionate about.

1.3. The Development Trend and Innovation of TED since its Inception

In the history of TED, from its inception in 1984 to 1999, it was the early start-up stage of TED, and from 2000 to the present, is truly the booming stage of TED. In 2006, each TED conference attendee had to pay a fee of $4,400, and admission was limited to those who were invited. By 2017, the fee had been raised to $8,500 for each invited attendee to the TED conference. With such a high price for admission, the audience is still full and enthusiastic.

As an internet-based program, TED has a huge following on its broadcasting platform YouTube website. As of January 5th, 2018, at around 10 a.m., TED had 8,693,138 subscribers, and at around 11 a.m., TED had 8,705,170 subscribers, increased 12,032 subscribers worldwide in one hour. And at this point, as of April 10th, 2021, TED currently has more than 19.2 million subscribers on YouTube (See figure 1: Subscribers of the Four Programs on YouTube). In more than three years, TED's subscribers have more than doubled, with an average increase of about 8,821 subscribers every day.

From this point of view, development to date, TED not only maintain a high level of audience attention, but also has a relatively fast audience growth rate. At the same time, while retaining the traditional format of the program, TED has also responded to the development trend of the times, constantly introduced a new audio-visual experience and interactive sessions, and created a number of online and offline projects and activities, such as the main branches – TED Global, The Open Translation Project (OTP), TEDx, TED Fellows, Ted Ed, TEDMED, and secondary branches such as TED Books, Ted Ed Clubs, TEDWomen,

TED Salon, TED Radio Hour. In addition, the location of the program has also expanded from the United States to the United Kingdom or Tanzania, a third world country in Africa, and other parts of the world. With the development of the times, the entire program with its high-quality content and continuous innovation to attract the hearts and attention of audiences around the world.
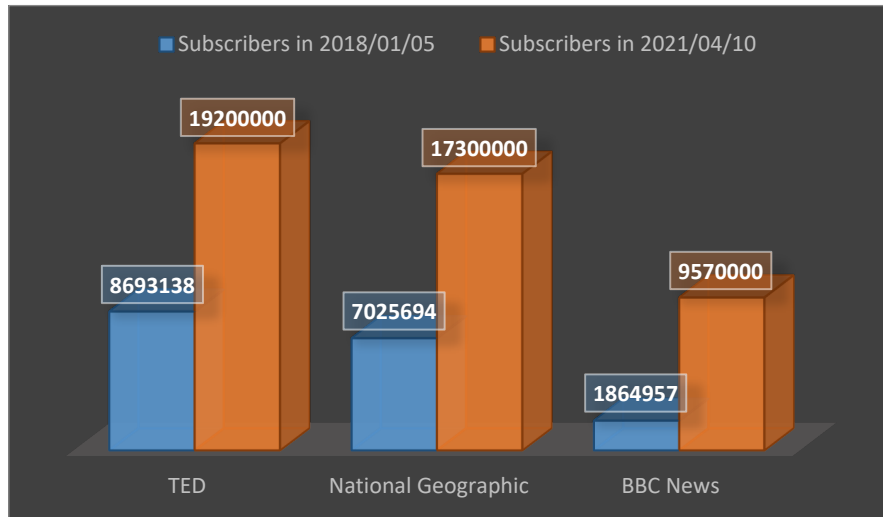
Figure 1. Subscribers of the Four Programs on YouTube

2. Problem Statement

We are currently in an era of rapid development of science and culture and high fragmentation of time, after graduating from school, the general public does not have time to continue learning scientific and cultural knowledge in the fast-paced social life. In the long run, this will inevitably lead to a disconnection between individuals and society, thus widening the cultural divide in society. At the same time, the current era is also an era of pan-entertainment, and the radio and television industry is facing the challenge of "entertainment to death". In China, as an important method of social education, the radio and television industry has been making changes and innovations in recent years, it is producing more and more excellent programs to promote Chinese culture and traditional culture to the public. which has played a certain role in public education. As Yiru (2015) mentioned, Chinese social education language programs suffer from low quality, outdated content, poor uniqueness, single program format, less innovation, and narrow distribution channels. However, these programs still do not meet the needs of people for fragmented learning in the era of fragmentation, and there is still an insufficient integration of programs with Internet.

3. Research Questions

TED, as an online social and educational program, has solved the mentioned problems well. Therefore, this paper will mainly analyse the content, features, value and public attention of TED, and then summarize the significance of such programs for China, so as to provide reference for radio and television industry of China and public education communication.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyse the development of TED over the decades, to summarize its strengths and weaknesses, and to provide new ideas and references for the development and innovation of China's radio and television industry, i.e., to guide society to form a new trend of thinking in the era of pan-entertainment and to better play the public educational function of radio and television programs.

5. Research Methods

In the research, qualitative research methods are widely used, such as text analysis, content analysis are mainly used to analyse TED's overall framework process, speaker selection and its value embodiment, language form, and program broadcast format from TED's program content and program features, exploring TED's advantages and features, and pointing out its shortcomings and improvement suggestions. And for the public attention and value of TED, basic data analysis was conducted, and the data was collected form the mainstream public platforms such as YouTube, TED's official website and so on.

6. Findings

6.1. The Program Content of TED

In order to analyse the content of TED, a large amount of content was collected and analysed. In particularly, the analysis of the public official text of TED's content on the official website was conducted, as well as the content analysis of a series of TED original videos published on YouTube.

6.1.1. The Overall Framework and Process of TED Talks

TED is a social and educational language program, with lectures as the main content, and regularly updated and broadcast on the YouTube and the official TED website. It covers a wide range of topics, from topics close to life to profound science, the wonderful and vivid language interpretation of speakers on screen allows the audience to see a larger and broader world. Tea breaks during the show allow the audience to communicate with each other in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere, exchanging views and unique opinions about the content of the speakers on stage.

Since 2005, the program has also added an innovative "TED Prize" session, the previous winners are excellent scholars in various fields, including Bill Clinton. In addition to the $100,000 prize, the winner of the "TED Prize" will be able to express his or her "Wish to change the world" on the TED stage. The organizers will do their best to help them turn their wishes into reality.

6.1.2. The Selection of Speakers by TED and the Value of the Selection

The selection of speakers is the core of a lecture program, different styles and positioning of the program is the main basis for the planners to choose different speakers. TED always adheres to the main theme of the program "Ideas Worth Spreading" and the program concept of "Technology, Entertainment, Design", so that planners have chosen a lot of distinguished speakers with unique influence in their fields

to serve as opinion leaders, thus increasing the authority and professionalism of the content presented in the program. For example, former U.S. President Bill Clinton, Microsoft CEO Bill Gates, British zoologist Jane Goodall, architect Frank Gehry, and many corporate CEOs, scientists, inventors, philanthropists, etc. have all appeared on the TED stage.

To a certain extent, TED's speakers can be commonly referred to as the "stars". But unlike this era of pan-entertainment, TED's speakers remind public that the role of "star" is not only a singer or actor engaged in entertainment, he or she may be a musician or a performing artist. The role of "star" is never just to provide people with gossip and the definition of "star" is not necessarily linked to entertainment. People of excellence in science, technology, design and many other fields are also worthy of the word "icon". Therefore, as Boyu (2018) mentioned, TED always favors people who can bring inspiration in the selection of speakers. The speaker who has "Ideas Worth Spreading" is really the one who is invited by TED to spread ideas and impart knowledge.

6.1.3. The Language Form and Content of the TED Talks

North American television programs have a major characteristic, that is not constrained to the rigid form, instead of a lighter and more pleasant atmosphere. For instance, the Oscars ceremony, the host used the self-deprecating way to open the show, with humorous language to win the audience's laughter and harmonize the atmosphere of the scene. In TED, one of the distinguishing features is the relaxed narrative sense of the speakers. As the study of Luyao (2016) found, TED speakers pay much attention to tone, mood, and persona in order to bring them closer to the audience and to facilitate the realization of interpersonal meaning. The language of TED's speakers contains the explanation of the truth and the dissemination of knowledge, and often interact with the audience in the form of "light humour". It not only plays a role in stimulating the audio-visual senses and attracting the attention of audience in just 20 minutes, but also enlivens the audience with the sound of applause and laughter at the scene.

For example, the lecture "*Do Schools Kill Creativity?*" spoken by the writer and education scholar Sir (2006), one of the top-rated TED Talks, uses funny language to talk about the disadvantages of the school system and the stifling of children's natural abilities and creativity. And "*Choice, Happiness and Spaghetti Sauce*" presented by writer Malcolm (2004), uses vivid language with examples, as the official description says: "'Tipping Point' author Malcolm Gladwell gets inside the food industry's pursuit of the perfect spaghetti sauce, and makes a larger argument about the nature of choice and happiness." (TED, n.d.) The speaker uses spaghetti sauce as a small entry point, which eventually rises to a philosophy of life about choice and happiness. Additionally, there are many similar examples that people of different races and perspectives use their own unique language to explain views that seem radical. Such as the talk of Asian political scientist Eric (2013) – "*A Tale of Two Political Systems*", which expresses sharp views and assumptions about Chinese politics. It is the different styles, different ideologies, and diverse modes that create the rich art form of TED talks and the diverse perspectives on the dissemination of ideas.

It is these different styles, different ideologies and diverse models that have created a wealth of art forms and diverse perspectives on the dissemination of thought in TED Talks.

6.1.4. The Stage layout and Broadcast Mode of TED

In the TED stage, there is no magnificent lighting, no surround sound and huge studio equipment, when the speaker is delivering a speech, no background music, no dance, only a ray of warm light thrown on the speaker. There is only a light and other simple multimedia projection equipment on the stage, but it creates quiet, minimalist conditions for reflection, bursting with the depth of thought in a slightly dark environment.

The mainstream media of TED is YouTube and the official website of TED as well as the official APP, and the videos are updated regularly. Since most of the speakers speak English, there are subtitles in different languages on the YouTube website, and volunteers from different countries translate the videos into their own languages and redistribute them on their local platforms, which broadens the distribution channels of the program and makes it widely distributed around the world.

6.2. The Program Features of TED

6.2.1. The Advantages and Characteristics of TED

As an online program and a social educational program, in the selection of speakers, TED has achieved a combination of celebrity or "star" and content, to guide the audience in the era of pan-entertainment, retain a habit of thinking and acquire knowledge through the program. Its invited speakers have overturned the values of "stars" perception in today's society.

From the content of the program, TED has the advantages of "5 multiple", that is, "multiple views, multiple perspectives, multiple positions, multiple fields, multiple diversity". "Multiple views" is reflected in the producers do not pursue the absolute unity of views and authoritative theory guidance. A lot of thinking that challenge the tradition, the debate between truth and fallacy, and new and innovative ideas are fully presented on the stage of TED. The "multiple perspectives" and "multiple positions" of TED talks lead audiences to think that there is not only one answer to a question, and there is more than "right or wrong" criteria to judge a matter. The "multiple fields" and "multiple diversity" refers to the fact that TED presents a rich and broad diversity in the perspective of each viewers through all kinds of lectures, including education, biology, physics, philosophy, psychology, design and invention, and many other fields. In the study by Verjovsky and Jurberg (2019), the public had a more positive response and support for scientific TED lectures. To a certain extent, it has facilitated the sharing and exchange of global knowledge, making it possible for knowledge without borders to become a reality.

In terms of the audience of TED, it has the characteristics of "4 multiple", that is, "multiple audiences, multiple ages, multiple levels, multiple professions". On the online broadcast platforms of TED, there is a large group of subscribers of TED, and the hundreds of thousands of plays each year and the increasing number of subscribers reflect the audience recognition of the social and educational language program. In daily life, audiences can use the 20 minutes that might be wasted or filled with meaningless things through the App of TED, to briefly learn the tip of an iceberg of the latest developments in society or other fields. The short time and the condensed knowledge without any complexity allow people to listen with more concentration. However, as a program that can be commonly accepted and recognized by the audience, it is not enough just to attract the audience to listen, the program must have high-quality content

as their fundamental element, but also to make the audience can understand the content and think about the meaning. TED speakers use an easy-to-understand format to explain and express those originally profound professional knowledge or principles, overcoming communication barriers and gaps, so that the audience of the program is not just those specific groups, but the general public, which accounts for an indeterminate number of people in society. Down to common students, TED talks can act the role of simple popularization and enlightenment of science, to cultivate their interests and shape their values of the world. Up to middle-aged people, in the simplest way to enrich themselves in their stressful work, to get a touch of relaxation and gain knowledge at the same time. And even for the ordinary researchers, in a speech of less than 20 minutes in the frontier field, they may be able to sprout new "orientation" and "point of view", broaden their minds and increase their imagination and creative ability.

6.2.2. The Shortcomings and Improvements of TED

Nothing can be characterized as perfect, because the characterization of perfection makes it lose the space and possibility of progress, and the two sides of the coin also suggest the transition between strengths and weaknesses. For TED, there are also some shortcomings.

First, the invited speakers generally have high academic and social status, which ensures the professionalism and authority of information transmission and knowledge education, but deprives the common people of the space and opportunity to present themselves. This high threshold of elitist access model, making the vast majority of people can only act as the audience of the network program. As Honglian (2015) pointed out, TED cannot have any contingencies in the presentation, everything must be designed in advance. Therefore, the interactivity with the audience in the era of full media is slightly absent here. But in the subsequent development of TED, the number of new organized activities, the TEDx, and other changes to a certain extent made up for the previous deficiencies, so that the common people can get the possibility to present themselves.

Secondly, although the short video is brief and concise, but the length is shorter than a daily documentary lecture, so that speakers who have a very full desire to talk and discuss cannot fully express their views and spread their knowledge, and have to choose to curtail the content due to time constraints. This reduction will make the audience prone to one-sided, incomplete acceptance of information, and then generate a biased understanding of a certain field and a subjective and arbitrary self-supplementation.

Thirdly, the information received by the TED audience is generally fragmented information, which meets the needs of fragmented learning today, but TED does not change the acceptance pattern of people in the era of information fragmentation. TED does not systematically analyse and summarize the content of the speakers at the end of the program, so that the information tends to be scattered and cluttered.

6.3. The Value Analysis and Public Attention of TED

There is a commonality between the value of things, and the value of a program can be seen in a simple way as what it brings to the audience and whether what it brings is meaningful. The social educational program TED is a meaningful program, it is a combination of knowledge and entertainment, as well as the interweaving and collision of views, the dissemination and expression of ideas, the scattering

and transmission of knowledge and the opening and sharing of resources, enhancing the quality of science in the whole society, subconsciously changing the perspective of how people view the world.
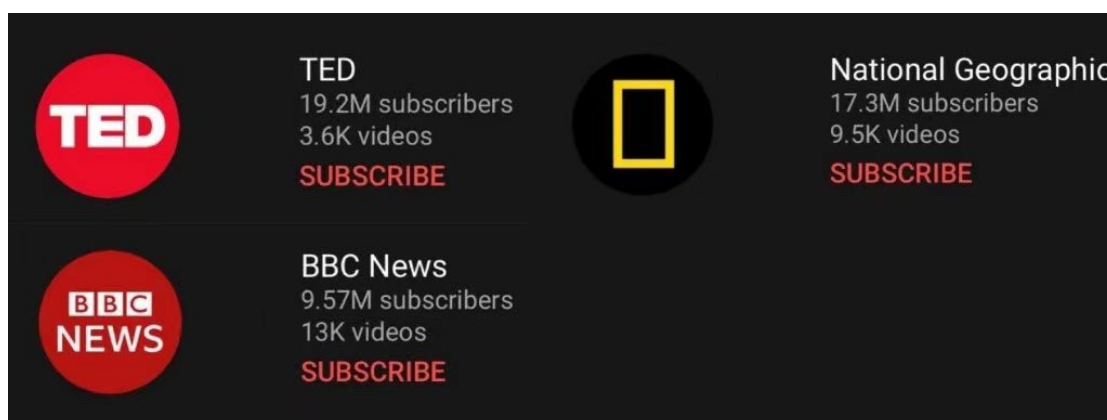
Figure 2. Screenshot of Subscribers of the Four Programs on YouTube

Some people say that people are fickle in this era. In order to study the performance of TED in public attention, a direct search for TED on the US video sharing website YouTube was conducted, and it's directly showed the number of subscribers and the number of uploaded videos. Search for three other related programs at the same time to obtain relevant data. After collecting the public data of subscribers of three popular programs on YouTube and comparing the mainstream data (See figure 2: Screenshot of Subscribers of the Four programs on YouTube), the documentary National Geographic has more than 17.3 million subscribers, and the news media BBC News has more than 9.57 million subscribers. In comparison, TED is ahead of the above three comparative projects with more than 19.2 million subscribers. Meanwhile, compared to the data of subscribers collected on January 5th, 2018 (See Table 1: Average Daily Increase in Subscribers on YouTube of the Four Programs), over more than three years (1191 days), TED also has a higher average daily increase in subscribers of about 8821 than National Geographic, and BBC News, which have a daily average increase of about 8626, and 6469, respectively.

Table 1. Average Daily Increase in Subscribers on YouTube of the Four Programs

Programs	Subscribers in 2018/01/05	Subscribers in 2021/04/10	Number of Days	Average Daily Increase
TED	8693138	19200000	1191	8821.88
National Geographic	7025694	17300000	1191	8626.62
BBC News	1864967	9570000	1191	6469.39

Through these data, it can be seen that people did not give up because of the relative lack of the entertainment of TED, but on the contrary, TED's followers have long been increasing by 8821 per day. This reflects the public's desire for knowledge and rational judgment, but also to remind more program producers of the urgent need of public for such programs, so that the program can really bring the audience some contents, which is still worth recalling and reflecting in years later.

6.4. Inspirations of Online Social and Educational Language Programs for China

The emergence and popularity of television and the Internet in China was later than in the Western developed countries, and language programs also started relatively late in China. It is a proven method to learn from the experiences and shortcomings of previous explorations and then to develop our own original programs. However, considering the protection of intellectual property rights and the national and cultural background of China, the development of online social educational programs in China cannot completely copy the content and format of TED.

In recent years, in the practical development of Chinese radio and television, "I am a Speaker" is an original program similar to TED. The speakers mainly tell stories from the perspective of common people, and these common people from different fields can express their views and opinions to impress the audience. The program adopts a competition model, while inviting judges with rich speech experience to comment, combined with beautiful lighting and choreography, to increase the entertainment of the program, while taking the social and educational function of language programs into account. However, the audience scope of TED is global network users, and "I am a Speaker" is still only broadcast on Chinese mainland TV and network. Therefore, domestic radio and television programs should continue to develop an international horizon and expand their scope of audience.

Meanwhile, the topics of speeches in TED mainly revolve around the frontier fields of natural science and humanities and social science. In contrast, Chinese social educational language programs mainly use content such as "Chicken Soup for the Soul" to morally educate audiences, but social educational programs for scientific content still do not break out of the documentary genre. Therefore, Chinese radio and television programs should enter into the scientific aspect, and make bold attempts and breakthroughs. Making the social education not only in the moral, but also in the field of science.

In addition, the short length of TED meets the needs of people for fragmented learning, although this short length may lead to biased understanding and arbitrary interpretation of certain content. However, Chinese programs can also learn from this short format to a certain extent, so as to flexibly curtail the length of the program. At the same time, the topics that are suitable for short length are integrated and sorted out to meet the learning needs of public in the era of fragmentation.

Last but not least, the English language used and the ideas explained in the TED talks also serve to spread Western culture, subconsciously influencing the values and ways of thinking of the new generation in the world. It is worth recognizing that "The Chinese Poetry Competition" and "China in the Classics", as the practice of social and educational programs in recent years, have used language programs as a bridge to carry a platform for spreading Chinese language and culture and promoting it to the world. It has both created a local cultural brand belonging to the Chinese civilization, developed an excellent cultural industry, and set off a wave of concern and learning about Chinese culture in the world. As Xiaoyan (2019) mentioned, language programs should be aimed at promoting traditional culture, while using modern technology, adapting to contemporary trends, to capture the needs of the masses, to create a "modern brand" for the "traditional culture". These practices have enabled people to realize the importance of gaining knowledge and improving quality while entertainment programs dominate the screen, which play a good role in the dissemination of value and knowledge.

7. Conclusion

In this era of pan-entertainment, entertainment programs are flooding the screen, and the public is lacking in the explosion of information to receive truly valuable information. Through TED, a successful model has emerged, which constantly summarizes the shortcomings of its decades of development and provides audiences with an audio-visual and thinking feast while retaining its advantageous features. At the same time, TED as a language program, which has many experiences to learn from. As Wenna (2020) mentioned, with the change of audience needs, it provides favorable conditions for the innovative development of social education programs. Therefore, the radio and television industry in China should seize this opportunity actively, continue to think and innovate, jumping out of the original constraints and framework, constantly promoting Chinese culture and cutting-edge science, creating excellent local programs, and innovating program formats and content. So that the entertainment and knowledge can be integrated and then disseminated, constantly nourishing the desire for knowledge of the public, improving the intrinsic level of a program, better play the role of public education, and guide society to form a new trend of thought'.

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