Four Ways TED2018 Will Make You Think

TED2018 tackled the future of artificial intelligence, the fate of humanity, the design of cities and its own Audacious Project.

By Sara Armbruster, Steelcase vice president, strategy, research and digital transformation

Eighteen minutes. That's just 1080 seconds to capture the attention of your audience and inspire them to do great things. This year, TED2018 invited people behind "jaw-dropping AI, glorious new forms of creativity and courageous advocates of radical social change" to take the TED stage for its marquee conference titled "The Age of Amazement." As Steelcase vice president of strategy, research and digital transformation, I was among the audience in Vancouver. A number of clear themes emerged as the conference unfolded.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

It's no surprise that one of those themes was artificial intelligence. Spectacular tech demonstrations have always been a feature of the TED stage, and that was true again this year. For example, I watched Google's Supasorn Suwajanakorn show incredibly realistic videos of former President Barack Obama speaking — videos created entirely by an AI model (Visit "Synthesizing Barack Obama").

This year at TED, however, an even bigger theme than AI was what role AI should play in our society. Suwajanakorn's videos raised the question of how we'll know in the future what is real and what is not if AI can create realistic video, audio and images. Yuval Noah Harari posed the question: Could AI threaten democracy? If information is concentrated in the hands of a few, could AI be created that knows an individual so well, it can manipulate that person and his or her views and feelings without the person knowing it? In light of recent debates about the role of social media in society, the question of how we can avoid allowing ourselves to be manipulated by those who control data is a timely one.

Jeron Lanier's solution to the challenge surrounding data control is to rewind the clock. He believes the single biggest mistake made in the development of the modern Internet was to make the internet free and public. The only way to have a free and public internet that also supports viable business models is to adopt the advertising model. We get free access in exchange for tech companies using our data to facilitate advertisers' targeting of ads. Jeron argues that what started in the 1990s as advertising has now become behavior modification on a mass scale that he sees as a threat to society as we know it. The solution Lanier proposes is to adopt a paid model for search, social media and other online tools. He suggests television is the model to follow – where many argue the best content being created is supported through paid models such as Netflix and HBO.

MIT's Cesar Hidalgo took the conversation about AI in society a step further. He asks: Could AI be used to automate politicians? Hidalgo argues that representative democracy has a very bad user interface, which means we don't use it as much as we could. What if the future of democracy is a direct democracy, where all citizens participate in decision-making through our individual AI agents? These agents would know us so well they couldn represent our views and make votes on our behalf.

THE SURVIVAL OF HUMANITY

While the future of AI and its impact on society is enough to keep us up at night, TED also tackled an even bigger question: How do we ensure the continued survival of humanity?

Will MacAskill, a moral philosopher at Oxford, said that effective altruism and philanthropy should be aimed at big, solvable and neglected problems. He argued that among the issues that fit these criteria are existential risks such as global warming, pandemic, or nuclear war that threaten humanity's survival.

Writer Charles Mann challenged the idea that people are special relative to all other living creatures. Many would argue that our specialness comes from our ability to develop collective knowledge and to work collaboratively to solve problems. If that's true, Mann asked, are we authentically using our knowledge and ability to collaborate in order to ensure the long-term future of humanity? He feels that humans could do better.

Economist Kate Raworth pointed out that going forward and upward is the most basic human instinct. Whether it's a baby's desire to sit, stand and then walk or a parent's hope to give her child a better life, we have a innate human obsession with growth. Why? Raworth argues our economies and entire way of life is now dependent on unending growth. Whether it be a company's quest for more revenue, a country's desire to increase GDP, or an employee's hope for a raise, she believes this is an unsustainable addiction. She offered ideas for how we might create economies that are regenerative and distributive by design to help end our structural dependence on growth.

Lastly, Stephen Webb, a physicist, looked to the stars and all of the scientific work that suggests the possibility of life elsewhere in the universe and asked: "Where is everyone?" If our universe is vast and there are other life forms out there, why haven't we found them or vice versa? Through a compelling set of facts and a scientific argument, Webb shared with us his conclusion: "I think we are alone." If the human race is the only life in the universe, then all the more reason to get to work on tackling the issues that threaten the survival of our species.

DESIGNING CITIES

TED wasn't entirely about questions of existential proportion. Designers and artists had their moment as well.

Architect Vishaan Chakrabarti highlighted a tension. He said living in a city is most healthy for the planet (city dwellers have a fraction of the carbon footprint as do those in more rural areas), but city living is being beset by a creeping sameness. The office building or apartment block being put up in your city is almost indistinguishable from similar towers going up in cities around the world. Chakrabarti offered ideas for designing cities that are more prosperous, sustainable and joyous.

Curator Nora Atkinson discussed the Burning Man festival and treated us to fantastic photography of what happens when people are inspired to create art for themselves rather than to satisfy the art market. And, engineer and bridge builder Ian Firth, made structural engineering more interesting than I could have ever imagined and shared photos of bridges around the world that took my breath away.

THE AUDACIOUS PROJECT

Lastly, this year TED introduced an initiative called The Audacious Project, aimed at making concrete progress on the kinds of issues that are often raised at TED. The Audacious Project team has been vetting ideas to solve big problems and working with a group of philanthropists to identify the projects with the best plans and likelihood of success. The TED organization is leveraging the TED community and its network to raise massive dollars to put behind these projects, $406 million committed to date. That's philanthropy on a major scale!

The founders or leaders of the five projects being piloted in this program presented their ideas and I found their collective work truly inspiring. The five are:

- GirlTrek is the United States' largest public health nonprofit for African American women and girls. In a country where 50% of American American women are obese and dying premature deaths at an alarming rate, GirlTrek encourages women to use walking as a practice first step to inspire healthy living, families and communities. With the support of TED, GirlTrek plans to mobilize and train 10,000 community volunteers to create GirlTrek chapters in their communities.
- Sightsavers' Caroline Harper is an advocate for the visually impaired. She shared her plan to create an army of community health workers in a handful of African countries to eradicate trachoma, a painful blindness-causing infection that can be treated or avoided with simple measures.
- Environmental Defense Fund and its president Fred Krupp announced a plan to use The Audacious Project funding to help combat global warming by stopping leakages of methane from a variety of sources.
- Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and ocean scientist Heidi M. Sosik are receiving a grant to study and preserve a unique layer of the ocean known as the twilight zone. Not only is the work compelling, but Heidi shared amazing (if somewhat scary-looking) photographs of creatures that live in the deep, deep ocean.
- The Bail Project | Poverty is not a crime and Robin Steinberg opened our eyes to what she describes as a bail system out of control in the United States. While bail was first introduced centuries ago for a specific purpose, she believes that system has turned into something else: a two-tier system of justice in America, where those who cannot afford bail are incarcerated. The Bail Project aims to combat mass incarceration by disrupting the money bail system.

All of these people and projects were inspiring, and you can read more about The Audacious Project on TED's website.

To learn how a TED Talk inspired a recent Steelcase innovation, read Steelcase Unveils Limited-Edition SILQ Chairs for TED.'

Sara Armbruster is Steelcase vice president of strategy, research and digital transformation. She works closely with Steelcase's businesses on major initiatives and oversees the strategy development process. In addition, she leads all corporate business development activity. She manages Steelcase's design research, which focuses on understanding users, changing work patterns, and the impact of emerging technologies in the workplace – all critical inputs to Steelcase innovations.