

'Ideas' conference to grapple with dark side of tech

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At a conference where thinkers and luminaries gather to discuss world-changing ideas and innovations, the talk is shifting to the dark side.

This year's theme of the annual Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED) conference starting Tuesday in Vancouver is "Age of Amazement," but with a keen eye on unintended consequences.

The gathering comes amid growing fears about a loss of privacy in the digital world, and a race to artificial intelligence and robotics which could spin out of control.

"The future is amazing, but there is good amazing and there is amazing terrifying," TED curator Chris Anderson told AFP.

"There is going to be an intense debate on what we think of the future. We are embracing those fears that the world may have gone mad in one way, but we are also embracing innovations, science and technology."

The TED community includes scientists, artists, activists, politicians and superstar entrepreneurs such as founders of Amazon, Google, Microsoft and Netflix.

This year's speakers include Netflix co-founder Reed Hastings and star Silicon Valley venture capitalist John Doerr, whose winning investments include early bets on Amazon and Google.

Former US vice president Al Gore, a longtime member of the TED community, will host a discussion on climate change at the conference

Anderson expected heated debate on the potential dangers as well as the benefits of new technologies.

"Is the world making progress or, despite our best efforts, are we making things worse?" he asked rhetorically.

"I think people are astonished and disturbed by a lot of the technology we have built."

Podcasts popping

While internet-age news cycles have attention shifting from one headline to another, TED is intended as an oasis where ideas and developments are thoughtfully explored.

"So many people don't want to hear about progress at the moment; they are not seeing it," Anderson said.

"They are feeling stress and anger. You could argue a collective talking ourselves into gloom and doom."

Since starting as an intimate gathering on the California coast 34 years ago, TED has grown into a global media platform with a stated devotion to "ideas worth spreading."

TED has a massive following for its trademark presentations in which speakers strive to give "the talk of their lives" in 18 minutes.

The standard cost of attending the main TED conference, now in Vancouver, has climbed to \$10,000.

Money brought in by the nonprofit Sapling Foundation behind TED is used to make talks available free in apps, podcasts and videos at online venues including YouTube and ted.com.

TED has had a hit with a new live-audience television series in India hosted by Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan.

Podcasts and a TED Radio hour have proven natural fits for the conference's spoken-word style presentations.

TED is poised to launch a native Spanish language podcast in a partnership with Univision as it expands its lineup with offerings such as podcast devoted to the genius of everyday objects and do-it-yourself neuroscience.

"The platform has seen spectacular growth despite all the competition from politics," Anderson said.

It has also started creating short-form video presentations, as smartphone lifestyles have people accustomed to snippets much shorter than 18 minutes.

"In the early days of TED, when we you told lecturers, professors and academics they had to deliver a talk in under 20 minutes they looked at you like you were crazy," said TED head of media Colin Helms.

"In internet time, when people are used to content as short as 15 seconds, it seems a much meatier format."

Turning talk to action

Anderson has gracefully but firmly encouraged TED's influential community to act on big ideas that win their hearts or minds.

An annual TED prize launched in 2005 that came with cash and support from the conference community to fulfill potentially world-changing wishes will be transformed this year into an "Audacious Project" funding ideas with "the potential to create massive, global change."

More than \$250 million has already been committed to the "collaborative philanthropy" model, according to TED.

Each year, the project will identify up to five ideas that stand out as thrillingly bold and have a credible path to execution.

"The notion of turning ideas into action will be a real sub-theme," he said of this year's gathering.

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