

14 DECEMBER 2020

TED

MALCOLM GLADWELL'S TED TALK

**LESSONS FROM
SPAGHETTI SAUCE**

Alexander M. Atzberger, 11354216

Data Journalism

dr. P.H. Sheets Thibaut

dr. D.C. Trilling

Word Count: 850



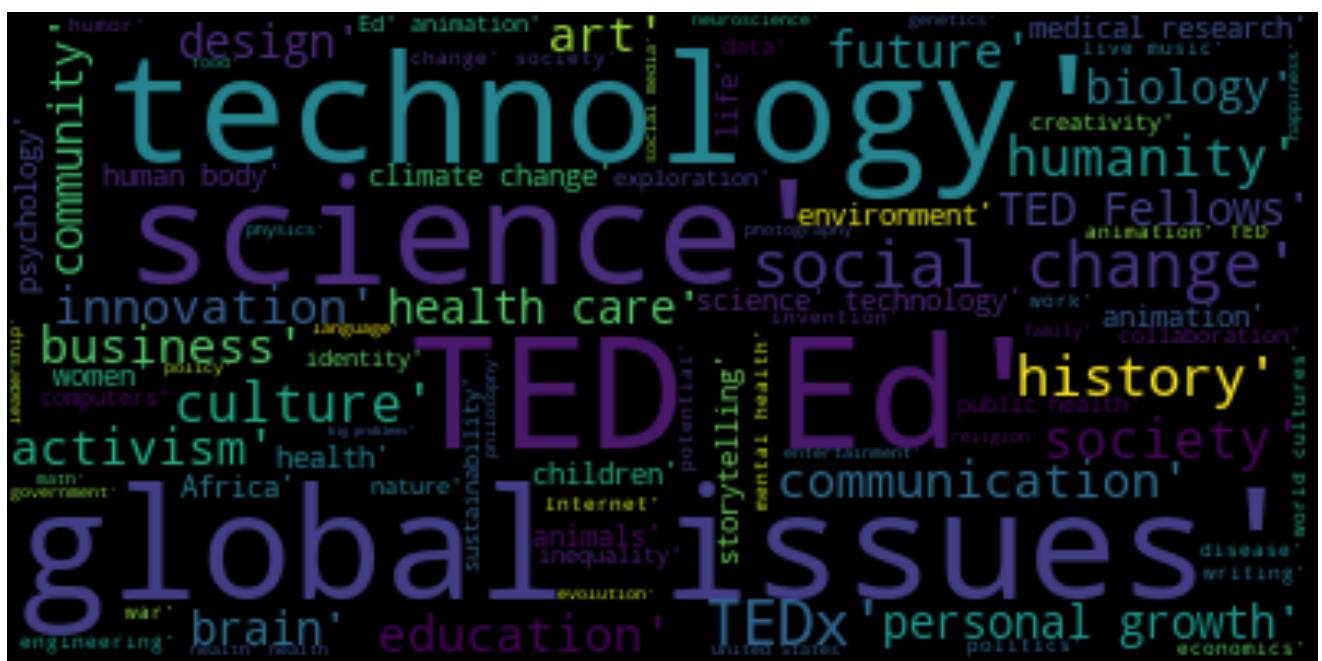
Malcolm Gladwell meditating on Spaghetti Sauce and happiness at the 2007 TED conference

There is no perfect spaghetti sauce. There are perfect spaghetti sauces (Latel, 2017). Associating spaghetti sauce with profound lessons for humanity, frankly appears to be a bit of a stretch at first glance. Especially when the narrator himself has a slightly eccentric look and a hint of mad professor to him. But following Malcolm Gladwell down his trail of thought during his 2007 TED talk, one quickly realises that not only the association spaghetti sauce-happiness is sound, it becomes crystal clear that valuable lessons about humanity can be found in the most unusual places. Who

would have thought it would come from a spaghetti sauce entrepreneur?

As part of the star-riddled line up of speakers at the various TED conferences, Malcolm Gladwell had a consistent theme in each of his three own TED talks: he is obsessed with outliers. Whether talking about consumer goods researchers, unusual WWII heroes or David, arguably the most famous underdog of all time, who beat Goliath with his sling. Outliers tell an interesting story, breaking the norm and thinking outside their respective box, as does Malcolm Gladwell. Gladwell is a Canadian born author, speaker and journalist who became famous for his work in The New Yorker on debunking the concept of the "talent myth" that organisations follow incorrectly, according to him. After taking the stage on the 2004 TED conference, his public fame took off, becoming an outlier amongst outliers. Amongst giants, where do Gladwell Ted Talks place? How did his very first TED talk place with regards to online audience reception? What did he talk about? And what in the world can we learn from spaghetti sauce?

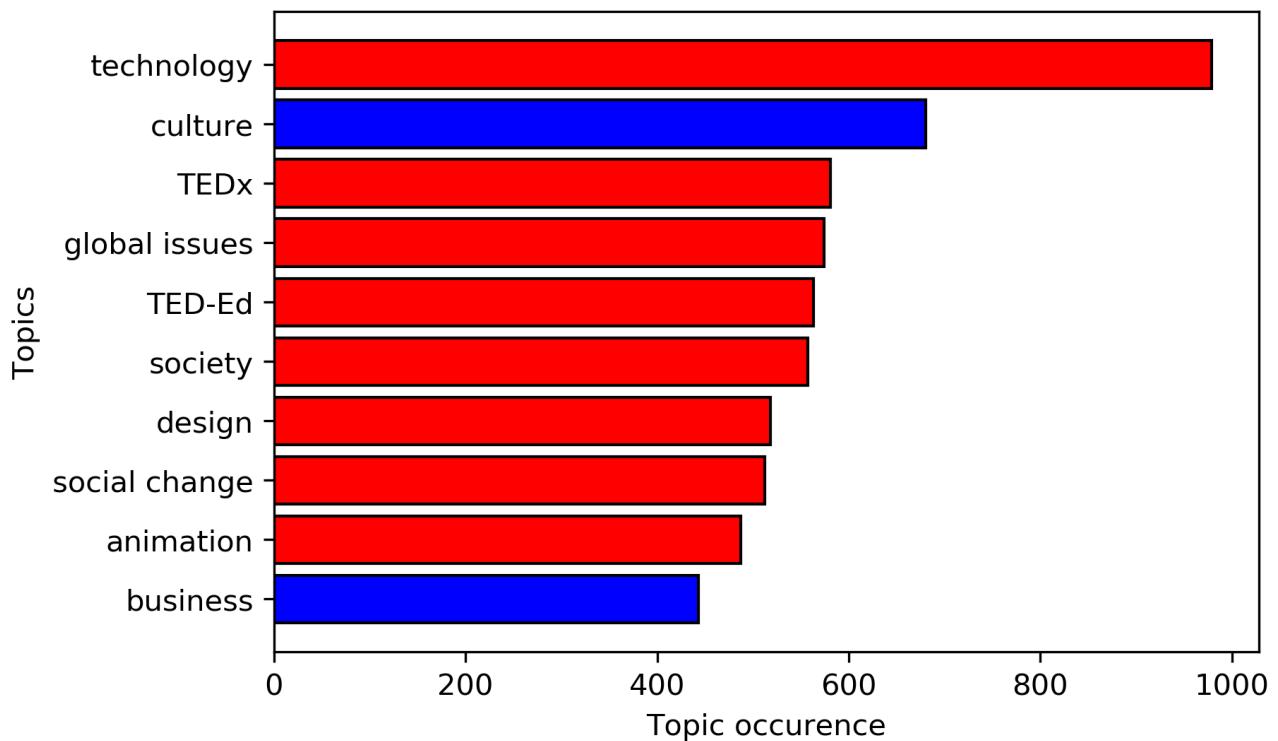
GLADWELL AMONG TED TALK'S



Representing the most popular 456 topics covered during the TED conferences

Over the course of 14 years, TED conferences have been an online platform with a substantial following, amassing a total of 8,6 Billion viewers (as of Dec 2020). The conference platforms has hosted speakers who have covered over 456 different topics, from technology, to social change, to skateboarding and all the way to the art of origami.

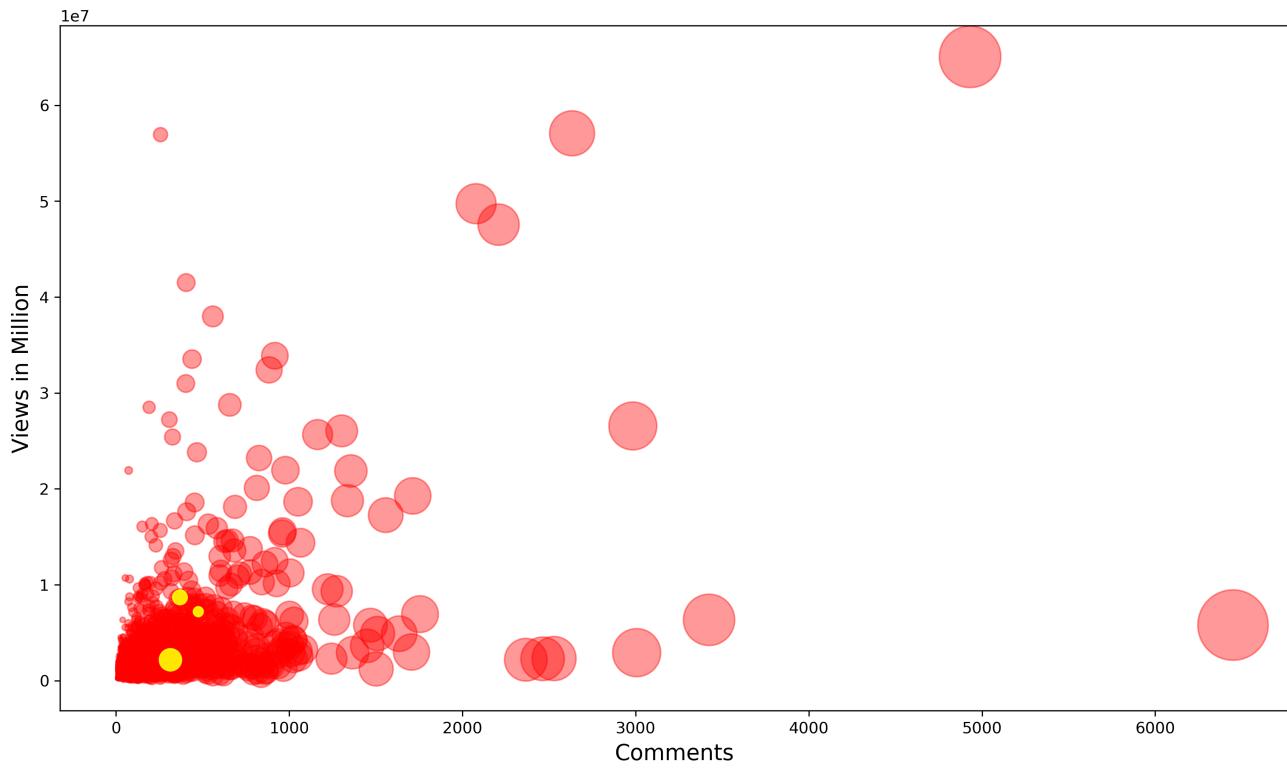
Among the most represented topics covered by speakers are talks on technology, culture and global issues, driving thought provoking ideas, research and much more to shape the future by looking *ahead*. Gladwell took a different approach. He looked at past events to make inferences about the future.



The most commonly covered topics, the blue charts representing the topics Gladwell covered during his first TED talk on choice, happiness and spaghetti sauce

How does Malcolm Gladwell fit into the line up? Gladwell's very first TED talk covered the topics of culture and business while talking about choice happiness and spaghetti

sauce (unfortunately that did not classify as a topic, but we will come back to that). His two subsequent talks deviated from broad topics to more specialised, niche presentations on a WWII bomb engineer and the background check of the biblical tale of David and Goliath.



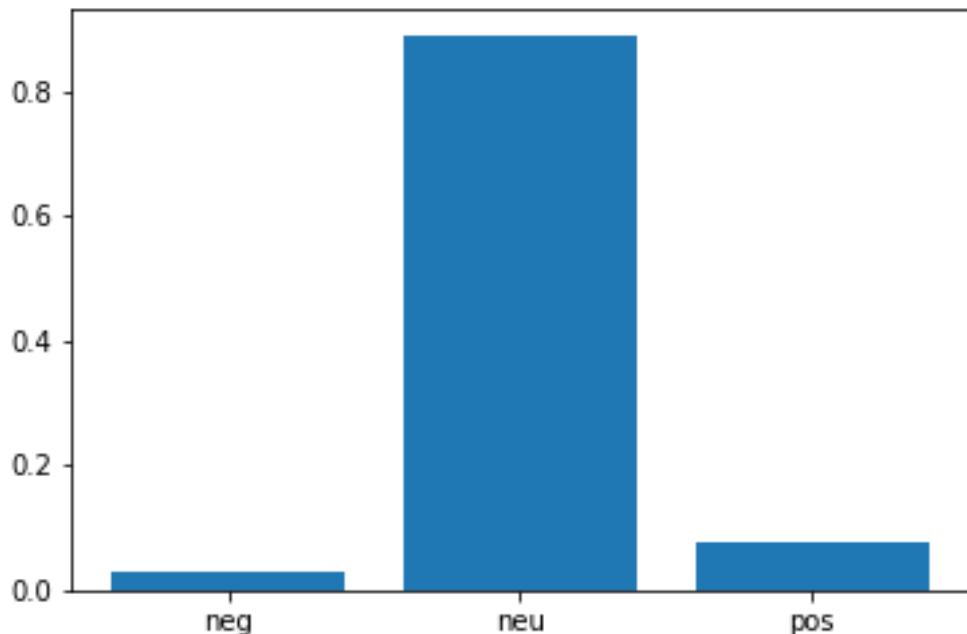
Gladwell's three TED talks in yellow

The coverage of more niche topics stands out when examining the views and comments of Gladwell talks. The amount of comments staying consistent across all three of his talks over the course of 10 years, yet the amount of views tell a different story, which incrementally increased with each talk. Yet this needs to be interpreted with caution, correlation is not causation, it is unclear whether the actual specialisation of topics lead to the increase of views or simply Gladwell's increasing fame as an author and speaker have simply boosted the amount of views. Another potential confounding factor might be that over time TED has accumulated a larger audience which more frequently was following the content that was uploaded on their platform. But now back to spaghetti sauce.

SPAGHETTI SAUCE

In his 2007 talk, Gladwell tells the story of Harold Moskowitz, a renowned consumer goods researcher. On his quest to identify the factors that make the perfect spaghetti sauce, Moskowitz realised that people do not want the perfect spaghetti sauce, but rather a variety of sauces to match their personal taste.

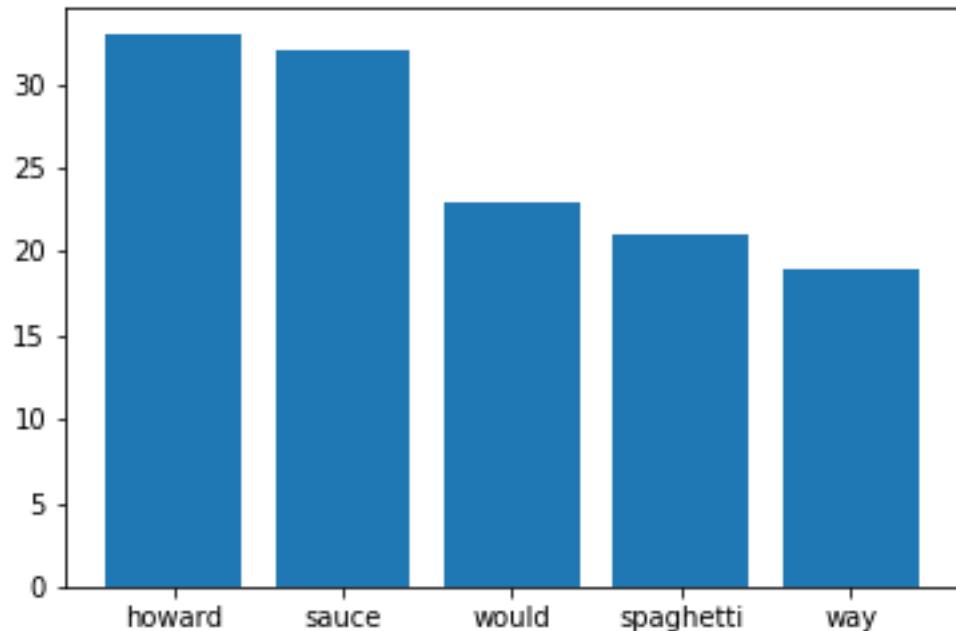
Examining Gladwell's transcript of his TED talk, his presentation around entrepreneur Harold Moskowitz lives on an interesting dichotomy. On the one hand, the majority of words used in his talk had a neutral valence, keeping his presentation objective,



The sentiment distribution of Gladwell's words during first talk

almost scientific. On the other hand, when looking at the words that he used most during his talk which focus on 'Howard', 'sauce' and 'spaghetti', Gladwell's talk appears more of a storyteller: he centres his narrative around Howard, he tells a story about a man passionate on his quest on finding the right formula. He tells Harold's story, not Malcolm's.

Gladwell's takeaways from researching Moskowitz spaghetti sauce experimentations



The most common words used in Gladwell's first TED Talk

translate right into Gladwell's talk in the grander scheme of TED Talks. There is no perfect spaghetti sauce, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. The key to true happiness is embracing the diversity of human beings. The same goes for Gladwell's talk; his approach to look back at the past to inform the future makes him stand out among a group of outliers, yet coming to a conclusion that is being preached by many. The TED conferences live on the variety of speakers, ideas and ways of presenting them. Variety is the spice of life, and not only when it comes to spaghetti sauce.

REFERENCES

Latel, I. (2017). Author Malcolm Gladwell on what tomato sauce can teach us about educating our kids. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-01/gladwell-what-tomato-sauce-can-teach-us-about-educating-our-kids/8863468>