

Technology

Unjaded And Jubilant At TED

Dennis Kneale, 03.04.03, 4:02 PM ET

For the better part of 20 years the fabled TED conference--for Technology, Entertainment & Design--has been an annual confab of the elite, the effete and the fabulous. It throws together 900 or so people, most of whom now pay \$4,000 a head for the privilege, for a five-day brain dump on the very latest in tech, science, the arts and maladies of the modern world.

As such, TED, a kind of Davos for the digerati, keeps the pulse of what's next and tracks how some of the coolest minds in the world are feeling. In the mid-1980s it brought together early innovators who knew that, one day, everyone would use laptops and PalmPilots and cell phones; in the 1990s it was among the first to showcase inflators of the dot-com bubble and decoders of DNA and the genome. Yet this year held out bleak prospects for TED, what with war imminent in Iraq, bioterror fears on the rise in the U.S. and a tech crash that still smolders, two years after impact.

"TED? I thought TED was dead," a pal told me last week, as throngs of TEDsters (their chosen tag) began descending on Monterey, Calif., their once-a-year breeding ground for ideas.

But here's the shocker: TED ain't dead, not at all, and in fact the mood of the wired-in cognoscenti last week was oddly, remarkably upbeat. It may be a hopeful harbinger in these troubling times. Legions of longtime TED loyalists--from media and entertainment, Silicon Valley and Silicone Valley (aka Los Angeles) and New York and London and Seattle and beyond--melded minds in Monterey to ponder what comes after the present pain. Some of it is way cool. A new 3D chat world from a Web shop called **There** will let you watch yourself flirt and frolic on screen. Rebel Wi-Fi networks are using unlicensed airwaves and empty Pringles cans--seriously!--to extend free Internet links for miles. And a nanotech dream can be seen in a drop of water; more on that later.

TED's central theme was Rebirth, including sessions on Resilience, Emotion, Creation and, on Saturday, a final one on Hope. It was fitting for an audience so abundant in survivors.

"The buzz is back, and in some ways it never left," says **Kim Polese**, a survivor, TEDster and founder of onetime dot-com darling **Marimba** (nasdaq: [MRBA](#) - news - people). Recently ousted **AOL Time Warner** (nyse: [AOL](#) - news - people) Chairman **Steve Case** was here, affable and unbowed. So were three dot-com icons, fallen but still standing: **Jeff Bezos** of **Amazon.com** (nasdaq: [AMZN](#) - news - people), **Bill Gross** of the once-hot **Idealabs** and **Priceline.com** (nasdaq: [PCLN](#) - news - people) founder **Jay Walker**.

Chris Anderson, the British publishing entrepreneur who bought TED last year and now runs it as a nonprofit, featured those three because "they were hyped as gods, tortured by the press with great glee and largely forgotten by most of us," he says. "And yet they're all survivors, they're all here and they all articulate a really exciting view of the future." If these guys feel up, "then it means there's reason to believe--because they got crushed."

Even the recorded music played during session breaks underscored a jubilant mood: "I get knocked down, but I get up again. You're never gonna keep me down," chanted Chumbawumba. "Did you think I'd lay down and die? Oh no, not I, I will survive," declared disco priestess Gloria Gaynor (although this accompanied a video of a proud, one-eyed animated droid that marches resolutely forward, only to get squashed by a plunging, mirrored disco ball).

TED was founded in 1984 by author and design guru **Richard Saul Wurman**, a fearsome Falstaff (Shakespeare *rules* at TED) who created an annual salon for the smart and the hip. Regulars dominate the scene. "It's inbred. Coming to TED for the first time is like showing up for an 8 o'clock dinner party at 11:30," says TED veteran **Kenneth Hertz**, a lawyer and marketing consultant with **MemBrain LLC** in Beverly Hills, Calif. "These people are brilliant--but some of them can't cross the street without help."

Seth Godin, author of the new marketing book *Purple Cow*, spoke of breakthrough ideas and the ample patience involved. Sliced bread, the standard against which other innovations are touted as "the greatest thing since," popped up in 1912 but didn't catch on for 15 years. "It was a complete, total failure," rescued only by the debut of Wonder bread, he told the crowd.*

Amazon's Bezos, lean and keen, gave a perky presentation on how the digital revolution has barely begun. He showed a 1917 **Sears** ad that exhorted, "Use your electricity for more than just light." "That's where we are" on the Web today, Bezos said. "Every idea begets another idea. If you do believe it's the very beginning, then you're incredibly optimistic--and I am."

Jay Walker, who has 220 patents and calls himself "one of the 10 most prolific living inventors," made a fevered pitch for his next Internet venture. Walker insisted the entire thing--even his presence at TED at all--was off the record. Never mind that hundreds of TEDsters heard it. (Hint: Think creepy Webcam networks and Medicaid moms as anti-terror sentries.) "No wonder that idea was off the record--it won't work," **Intuit** (nasdaq: [INTU](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) founder **Scott Cook** carped later, continuing a hallowed TED tradition of erudite trash-talk.

Venture capitalist **Steve Jurvetson** of **Draper Fisher Jurvetson** talked up the promise of nanotech, the futuristic manufacture of teeny machines, chips and components at the invisible, submicroscopic level. His firm has invested \$56 million in 14 nanoshops in the past three years, with more to come. To underscore the scale of advances that nano might deliver, he told TEDsters that a single drop of water contains more molecules than the total number of transistors produced since their invention in 1947; a single Pentium 4 chip has 42 million transistors.

Juan Enriquez did Jurvetson one better. Enriquez, director of Harvard Business School's Life Science Project, invoked the promise of the densest of memory chips: a microscopic organism called *amoeba dubia*. It has a genome consisting of 670 billion base pairs of DNA--200 times the size of the human genome. Each base pair could be coded to store two "bits" of binary computer code, which is made up of 1s and 0s. Scientists are working on this now.

"So information storage may not turn out to be chips, it may turn out to be something like this," Enriquez said, flashing a large, translucent splatter of amoeba on a giant screen. A big worry, he added, is that such efforts could be hobbled by U.S. government restrictions on stem cell research.

The folks in Monterey were mindful of global problems--Iraq, terrorism, AIDS in 62 million people. But they also took time to flirt, using TED's nifty Intro online system. Custom-designed by a small shop called **Mixed Grill**, whose coders were fueled by caffeine-rich Red Bull, Intro let TEDsters list their profiles, complete with personal and professional interests and a Webcam mug shot. They could then click on a PC cluster map to find folks with similar interests--and e-mail them a "hello."

Timothy Coffield, a mechanical engineer with **Dahti Technologies** in Grand Rapids, Mich., picked out a few comely photos and fired away, hoping to hear back. "We aren't talking work here--this is *life*," he said.

TED transports attendees outside their normal loop. Thus they heard from **Deborah Gordon**, a University of Stanford biologist who seeks clues to organizational behavior by observing a colony of seed-eating ants on a plot of land in southeastern Arizona.

"I've only been looking for 20 years," she said, eliciting laughs. Turns out "ants are survivors," she says ("They're doing a lot better than dot-coms"), thriving for hundreds of millions of years and inhabiting every continent on the earth except Ant-arctica. Go figure. Colonies run without any central control or bosses, yet ants switch among several key jobs and mobilize when a crisis emerges--such as the appearance of stacks of toothpicks that Gordon's team lays too close to the entryway of an anthill to tick them off. Males live a year, mate once and die. The queen then flies a short way to a new site, burrows underground and stays there, laying eggs for 15 to 20 years, all derived from that single multi-partner tryst.

It is the kind of alien trip that wows the crowd at TED. "It's easy to get too caught up in our own world," says **Michael McCue**, president of **TellMe Networks**, which makes voice-automated help line software. "The economy goes up and down, but there's this group of people who just keep trucking forward, and lots of them are here."

So many, in fact, that nonprofit TED turned a \$1 million profit in Monterey, says Anderson, who owns TED through his philanthropic Sapling Foundation. Ever earnest, he has promised the profits to three pursuits: saving the oceans, improving water quality and public health. "Most tech conferences have cratered," Anderson says. "We're actually rather surprised."

*Seth Godin's comments were wrongly attributed to Jeff Bezos in an earlier version of this story.