

TED: 'There's an awful lot of brains out there' – all working to save the world

The TED ideas conference brings together some of the world's most dynamic people – such as prize-winner Jamie Oliver. He explains how they inspire action on society's biggest problems

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Chef and food campaigner Jamie Oliver speaks at TED2011, held in Long Beach, California. Photograph: James Duncan Davidson/TED

At seven in the evening, the bags under [Jamie Oliver's](#) eyes seem to have acquired bags of their own. He looks as if he hasn't slept for days. It might well be so, for he has just spent an exhausting two-and-a-half months filming in Los Angeles for his new series, during which time he was banned from every school in the city, and moments earlier he had bounded on to the stage of the [TED](#) ideas conference and delivered a six-minute talk on the progress of his food revolution.

"It was really tough," he told me. "I mean how do you sum up a year in six minutes?" But the reason he did it, why he flew in from South Beach in Florida to do so, and delayed his return to Britain, is because "there's more power in that room than there is in Capitol Hill and Downing Street combined. Those people can get things done."

"That room" is the Terrace Theatre of the Long Beach Convention Centre, south of Los Angeles, and "those people" are the 1,350 individuals who pay more than £4,000 to attend four days of talks by some of the most interesting and dynamic people on the planet. A year ago [Oliver was given the TED prize](#), a \$100,000 award that comes with the chance to make "a wish to change the world" and a community of people who commit to making it happen. Then, he announced his wish was to "educate every child about food" and "empower people everywhere to fight obesity". It was a call to arms, a mission statement, a detailed breakdown of how food and food-related diseases are the biggest killers in America. It has since been watched by more than a million people on [Ted.com](#) and it galvanised the TED audience into action.

Last week he told me: "It was just astonishing. All these people, they just started putting up their arms and offering me all this stuff. Not just money, but all sorts of things. This truck. The website. All sorts of things. It was quite incredible."

We are sitting in the truck which he has parked outside. It is an 18-wheeler big rig, and has been turned into a mobile kitchen to travel the US hosting roadshows and cooking workshops. The money to pay for them was donated within minutes. And the traction Oliver has been able to gain, the five permanent kitchens he has opened in the US, the political pressure he has been able to apply, has been in no short part due to his involvement with TED.

Because it is hard to overstate not only the power of the people in Long Beach last week, nor their wealth – some dinners boasted a handful of billionaires each – but also their creativity and commitment. These people are behind some of our age's greatest technological breakthroughs – [Bill Gates](#) of [Microsoft](#) and Larry Page and Sergei Brin of Google for starters; scientists working at the cutting edge of human knowledge; and the activists, environmentalists, artists, film-makers and educationalists all striving to change their particular corner of the world.

Or, as Oliver puts it: "There's an awful lot of brains out there." There are, and it is comforting to know they are working on some of the world's most intractable problems, coming up occasionally with ingenious solutions. From Google's prototype self-driving car, in which the audience got to speed around an obstacle course, to Aaron O'Connell, a quantum physicist, whose research has shown that "objects can be in two places at once", to the mind-boggling moment when Anthony Atala, a professor in regenerative medicine, called a colleague from the back of the stage and showed off a human kidney "which we printed earlier". Atala is using ink-jet printers to make human organs with cells rather than ink. Organs which have been successfully implanted into people like Luke Massella, who was born with spina bifida and who walked out on stage, a fit and healthy college student.

It's not all about finding the cure for cancer or solving global hunger: there's the odd performance poet or New York indie rock band (Antony and the Johnsons) around, but at times it did feel as if questions about the limits of the human condition itself were being asked. From Daniel Tammet, an astonishing high-functioning autistic and savant, who explained the patterns and colours that informed how he perceived the world, to Ed Boyden, a pioneer in optogenetics, who discovered how brain cells can be controlled with light and whose work includes research on how memories can be downloaded, or uploaded, in the human brain.

There is a surface gloss and glamour to TED: everybody has their own Cameron Diaz moment (mine is at the coffee bar) or Goldie Hawn moment, or Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore moment – but, in this context, it is more exciting when, on my next trip to the coffee bar, I find myself standing next to Daniel Dennett, the great American philosopher of the mind.

He has given three TED talks in his time "and, you know, I've written some very well-selling books, but the effect of having those talks online has been amazing. I get emails every day from people who've seen them, far more than I can respond to. And it's turned TED from being where the dotcom billionaires would come for this very elite and completely closed party and into this amazing force for knowledge."

The last talk was by Roger Ebert, the US film critic and screenwriter who lost his jaw – and ability to speak – to cancer, but, through his wife and a speech-software program, he told how computers had given him back his voice. "I can communicate as well as I ever could," he said, and the power of computers to connect us together was forming "a global consciousness".

These are big words, but in a room in which a Canadian doctor, Bruce Aylward, explained how and why he was working to eradicate polio, and Jack Horner, an American palaeontologist, how he is trying to reverse-engineer a dinosaur from a chicken, they didn't seem *that* big.

Back in his cooking truck, Oliver looks close to collapse. He has just committed to spreading his food revolution for the next 20 years: "Because that's about how long I think it needs."

When he won the TED prize last year, some considered him an unlikely choice. He doesn't exactly fit the rocket-scientist mould. But what TED recognised is that, in his own way, Oliver is as radical an activist as any and it came, he says, "at exactly the right time. It just gave me the support I really needed." It also means that, just possibly, he might succeed.

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