Conversation is the New Attention
Christopher Fahey, Timothy Meaney

This article is adapted from their SXSW 2011 talk, Toss the Projector: Redefining the Speaker/Audience Dynamic. In the talk, Tim and Chris unveiled Donohue, a new experimental tool designed and built by Arc90 and Behavior Design which tears down the wall between audience and presenter, allowing the audience to interact directly with the presenter’s ideas to begin a conversation.

Embracing distraction

You’re in a not-too-comfortable chair, in a large, slightly-darkened room. On stage, someone speaks into a microphone. Like your peers around you, you’ve come to hear someone speak about something you’re interested in. The speaker, in turn, has thought a lot about their subject—perhaps a lifetime’s worth.

Looking around, you see that your neighbors aren’t entirely there. Some faces are turned downward, brightly underlit, gazes focused not on the speaker but on a glowing screen. Perhaps you, too, want to pull out your laptop or smartphone. Before long, it seems like much of the audience has their attention focused...elsewhere.

Whether it’s a professional conference like SXSW or An Event Apart, a concert or a political speech, a college classroom or lecture hall, the dynamic between speakers and audiences is changing. Some argue they’re disconnecting.

We’ve thought a lot about this problem, about how technology is changing how we pay attention and learn. We’ve paid special attention to professional conferences, where the lecture room dynamic can be so monotonous that some conferences actually brag that the best stuff happens in the halls.

Speakers blame the audience’s insatiable addiction to being connected and multitasking. They ask or even demand that audiences close their laptops. They disable WiFi so people have no choice but to pay attention to the speaker. Solutions like these, however, smack of “blaming the user”—user experience design’s cardinal sin. Even though audiences are often and easily distracted, audiences are not the problem.

Conversely, audiences blame speakers for depending on PowerPoint and mind-numbing bullet points. Yes, speakers need help. There are many great resources to help empower speakers, build their confidence, stagecraft, and interpersonal skills. Instead of adding to that body of work, we chose to examine the very format of professional conference public speaking. We call this “the public speaking technology,” meaning: (a) gathering people in a room, (b) giving the speaker(s) a microphone and a projector, and (c) allowing the audience to ask questions at the end.

That’s the extent of what public speaking technology is today.

In a world where every piece of information can, with a single tap on a pocket-sized glass screen, lead to more and more information, our ideas need to move faster, people need to share ideas and bounce them off of each other more spontaneously than ever, anytime, anywhere. Public speaking technology has not kept pace with the technology of everything else.

So we asked ourselves: how can we improve the technology of public speaking?

May we have your attention, please?

The best conference talks share a common attribute: they start a conversation. The conversation begins in the room, and may echo for weeks or months afterward. In the very best, fantastic, mind-blowing talks, some of the audience, compelled by the speaker’s ideas and unable to hold their thoughts, gripes, or questions until the Q&A session, type notes or share their thoughts on Twitter. They’re deeply engaged with the talk, of course. But as the presenter stares out at the audience, it’s impossible for them to tell the difference between the energized participant, busy echoing or debating their ideas, and those reading their favorite celebrity blog or answering e-mail.

A few years back, Tim attended the Memphis IA (Information Architecture) Summit. Jesse James Garrett gave the closing plenary. Jesse’s remarkable talk took a unique approach: without slides or projector, he delivered his thought-provoking point of view while walking around the room. With speakers’ notes in hand (on his iPhone), Jesse walked among and directly addressed his peers. His talk was compelling—
anyone claiming to be an Information Architect or Interaction Designer, rather than a User Experience Designer, is either “a fool or a liar.” Garrett accomplished exactly what a great presenter hopes to do: he started a conversation. The discussion started in the room, and continued for weeks in various forms. In fact, strong opinions about his ideas exist today. This presentation made a lasting impression on Tim, but here’s the interesting part: Tim wasn’t there.

Tim was hurrying to the Memphis airport to catch a flight. But Tim was ‘at the talk’—tracking the hashtag on an iPhone from the cab, engaging with Jesse’s points, replying to tweets, and forwarding these ideas to his network. He was a carrier for Jesse James Garrett’s ideas. Despite his physical location, they were having a conversation.

This story underscores that technology constantly edges and even leapfrogs ahead of established social norms: in this case, the social norm of giving physical, undivided attention to a presenter. There were people in the room with Jesse, seemingly not paying attention but doing him a great service by relaying his ideas. Without them, Tim would have been shut out from the conversation.

All good ideas are conversations

Conferences presentations, like comic books, magazines and movies, are media. And they are all evolving away from a broadcast heritage.

From the printing press through 20th century Big Media, from large-scale commercial print to AOL, information has flowed from central producers to consumers. From Geocities to blogging to The Daily, collectively we still believe that the best way to share ideas is through broadcast publication. Produce and distribute; receive and consume.

This remains the case today—just take a look at your average magazine iPad app. It’s essentially a PDF that you can touch. It’s like paper. It’s one way. It’s broadcast.

But the future of publishing, of media in general, isn’t broadcast.

As humans, we’re on an unwavering path to make it easier to communicate with one another. All media is influenced by our desire to talk to one another, our need to contribute to the conversation. Compare I Love Lucy to Lost: the conversations about Lost were as important as the show itself. Compare old time radio, families gathered around for a fireside chat, to modern sports or political talk radio, where conversation and debate is the show. Compare CNN to Reddit.

Successful media endeavors of the near future will embrace experience, engagement, and conversation.

Conferences are conversations, too

This conversation revolution has no boundaries, and it certainly doesn’t respect flimsy conference room walls. A conference presentation, like a television show or an online news article, is now a place for conversation. Conference organizers and presenters ignore this at their own peril.

Presenters invest time in crafting a talk around a thesis, building slides and practicing in front of a mirror, because they want to share their ideas; they hope that their ideas become memes that compel the audience to spread them beyond the conference room via their extended social networks.

We propose a new rule for talks: if your presentation’s goal is something other than starting a meme, cancel it. What’s the point of your presentation if not to spread your ideas? Are you giving a speech, or do you want your ideas to begin a conversation? A conference is the perfect place to start a meme. Audience and presenter interests are aligned: to be exposed to new ideas and to make connections with people. And both involve conversation.

The first rule of great presentations is for the speaker to completely believe in what they are talking about. We need technologies that expose the speaker to criticism and rebuttal. So we decided to create a technology that forces the speaker to believe and be accountable for every single thing they say.

The second rule of good presentations is for the speaker to listen carefully to the audience’s responses. When people share their ideas with the world, regardless of the medium, it’s a wonderful opportunity for an idea to grow far beyond the originator’s intent and imagination: but only if the speaker puts it all on the line, and eagerly awaits their audience’s response.

The backchannel

So there’s our problem: we know we need to create and empower conversations at conferences. The prob-
lem is that speakers worry too much about combating “the backchannel.”

Conventional conference wisdom is that speakers are fighting a war for the audience’s attention. On one side, there’s the speaker, armed with beautiful slides, succinct bullet points, a commanding stage presence, and a great speech. On the other side is Twitter, Facebook, e-mail, YouTube, etc. The audience is in the middle, torn between datastreams.

When a speaker sees an audience member’s under-lit face, they lose confidence and flow. They wonder what the audience is actually doing. Is the guy in the front row e-mailing his sweetheart, or quoting something the speaker said over Twitter? Is the woman in the back commenting on a funny cat video, or writing down the awesome idea she had after hearing the speaker say something deeply inspiring?

The backchannel irritates many speakers. But giving the speaker the power to cut audiences off from the backchannel would be, we think, the wrong solution. The speaker doesn’t need any more power. The speaker is armed to the teeth. The speaker is already the center of the universe. The audience came specifically to hear the speaker’s ideas!

It’s time to empower the audience, not the speaker. Audiences need the power they deserve—or, more accurately, speakers need to acknowledge and accept the power audiences already have: the power to let their minds fully explore the ideas presenters are sharing with them.

Audiences are already reaching out. That’s why the backchannel sprung up in the first place. That’s how “live tweeting” came into existence. Because people want to talk, and are accustomed to talking every time they get a great idea, or every time they hear a great idea.

On attention

So if we’re worried so much about losing people’s attention, let’s take a moment to ask: what’s so special about attention? What is attention, anyway? Wikipedia says that attention is a “cognitive process of selectively concentrating on one aspect of the environment while ignoring other things.”

In his book Brain Rules, John Medina identifies four significant characteristics of attention:

1. Emotions get our attention

Attention is most easily gripped by emotions, threats, and pleasures: ideas that challenge our deeply-held beliefs, images that shock or arouse us.

2. Meaning before details

We want to know why something is relevant to us. Only then will we be willing to spend the time it takes to understand the details of it.

3. The brain cannot multitask

The idea that multitasking is a myth seems to be well-established by now, although a decade ago it seemed like multitasking was the inevitable future of human consciousness. We are learning to work with, not against, our cognitive limitations.

4. The brain needs a break

We believe in giving audiences freedom, even if it’s the freedom to zone out or take a break from one part of a talk to focus on another part. That’s how people learn.

But we don’t think that our need for breaks or our inability to multitask quite captures the nature of the problem. It’s not a zero-sum game, where either the speaker or Twitter captures the audience’s attention. When an audience member decides to do something besides sit still and listen, it’s not necessarily a futile attempt at multitasking.

It’s not “multitasking” to take notes or have a conversation with your colleagues during a presentation—as long as you’re talking about the topic at hand. Some call this “multiplexing,” where overlapping tasks are closely related to each other, and even complementary. Attention is not lost in multiplexing—in fact, it is multiplied.

Attention is a precious commodity. But attention is changing, because humanity itself is changing. With our constant connection to technology, we are fundamentally changing as people. We are, in fact, becoming cyborgs. Technology is an integral part of how we remember things today, for better or worse. We are always connected. We always have access to external information. And to our friends. What does attention really mean to a cyborg? We think we need
to take this change into account in conferences, not fight it.

We think we should add a fifth need to John Medina’s list that addresses our social urges and that opens up a technological opportunity:

5. People need to react to interesting things

People need to be able to react to things that interest them. To respond. Asking people not to respond when they hear something interesting goes against everything we are relentlessly and inevitably becoming.

And we need to react in meaningful ways. Not just clapping or booing, but actually communicating and conversing. We need to immediately tell someone else what we thought, we need to write down what we thought to remember it later, we need to articulate exactly what we thought at the moment before it slips away.

The model of the rapt audience so enthralled by a speaker that you can hear a pin drop actually prevents this kind of meaningful reaction. It diminishes an audience’s emotional connection with the content because it stifles the audience’s ability to fully experience the thoughts they have in response to the talk.

Think about the whole format of having Q&A at the end of a talk. If near the beginning of the talk you get an idea for a question you want to ask the speaker, you have to keep your mouth shut for the next half hour. All you’ll be thinking about is “OOH! OOOH! I have this brilliant question I want to ask!!!” And then at the end, you may not even get to the microphone in time to ask about it: some blowhard may hog the mic to sell his product or make a speech.

Because of these problems, Cennydd Bowles wrote a manifesto calling for an end to conference Q&A sessions, for many of the reasons cited above. But we think that by giving the audience the power to ask their questions or express their reactions as soon as they spring to mind, we can get around his core complaints.

Audiences should be able to register questions at any time, and speakers should be able to choose the best questions to answer. The dynamic of Q&A made us realize that presentations are interactions. So the challenge of making great presentations must be an interaction design challenge. Our passion, and our medium!

Marshall McLuhan said “the medium is the message,” meaning that the nature of the tools we use to share our ideas profoundly influences our ideas. David Weinberger takes that idea and updates it to “We are the medium”: today, ideas are spread not by broadcasting and satellites and other amazing new technologies, but by people using technology.

**Enter Twitter, enter Donahue**

Donahue is the experimental application we designed and built, and debuted at SXSW on March 13, 2011, to explore the ideas and concepts discussed here so far. You can view the app, and see our progress on it, at [http://www.donahueapp.com](http://www.donahueapp.com).

Donahue is a web application that enables audiences to more closely connect with a speaker’s points and ideas, and to share reactions to those ideas with their peers, both in the room and beyond, during and after the live event.

We chose Twitter as the main conversational channel for Donahue’s interactions. Why? Isn’t Twitter the enemy of attention? We don’t think so. Twitter actually has a built-in quality that is much like the dynamic of a presentation: like a conference presentation, it’s asymmetrical at its core—following someone on Twitter is choosing to hear what they have to say. But it’s also conversational, permitting users to speak to one another. Moreover, Twitter is public. It puts your words out in the world, allowing them to escape the confines of the conference room, exposing them to the world for discussion, critique, and evolution.

We knew that this dynamic would be an excellent addition to public talks. In fact over the last few years, Twitter has emerged as a de facto part of presentation technology as audiences use it as a discussion platform even without the presenter’s consent.

Twitter also has a great kind of resonance. The best presentations somehow end up, in some resonant form, on Twitter. Speakers currently have to hope that their talk gets picked up on Twitter, as if Twitter was the evening news.

Instead, with Donahue, we chose to embrace Twitter, to make speakers tweet their ideas (which we call “points”) to the world as they speak—and to encourage their audiences, whether in the room or not, to respond to and propagate those ideas. Participants using Donahue are limited to viewing only the speaker’s
points and the Twitter conversations of those who choose to focus on the event itself, filtering out the rest of the Twitter universe and keeping the participants centered on the speaker’s ideas.

The Donahue experiment at SXSW was extraordinary, both for us as speakers and for audience members, in the room and around the world. Over 400 people directly participated in the discussion by logging in to Donahue with their Twitter accounts. A few thousand responses were tweeted during and after the talk. Importantly, a permanent record of the talk now resides on the web. Donahue stopped collecting related tweets soon after the talk, but our ideas and reaction to the tool itself echoed through the audience’s extended network for days.

Like any good experiment, we got some unexpected results and insights, too. There were too many points, being published too fast. The conversation flowing into the Twitterverse wasn’t always welcome by those who hadn’t chosen to join our talk. Some participants wanted to limit the visible conversation to their own Twitter connections. In short, we learned that Donahue needs to incorporate some social graces with its technical abilities.

But it worked: Donahue was our thesis manifest; our conference presentation became a conversation.

### Paying attention together

McLuhan said “we shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us.” Social media has changed us so much that we now expect to be able to use it just as readily as we expect to open our mouths and talk. Probably even more readily. Our attention has been shaped, changed, by our tools—our friends are now part of our attention. By suppressing this, we are denying who we are. We are social media animals. And there’s no reason we should stop being so at conferences.

A conference is not a place to hear someone read their research paper or blog post aloud. It’s a place where a few hundred people get together to agree to pay attention together. Even better, it’s a place where people agree to think about ideas together. And to talk about them.

When you pay attention together, and think about ideas together, and most importantly talk about them in the same energized moment, well, that’s where the best stuff really happens.
And that is because you probably shouldn’t discuss these topics unless you want to get into an argument with the person or make the person uncomfortable. Seriously, just don’t. And of course there are some people who might just not feel like talking. Remember, if someone gives you a lot of one word answers, doesn’t make eye contact, and doesn’t ask you any questions; that probably means they aren’t in the mood for a conversation. Usually the best way to start a conversation is to talk about your current situation. The questions you ask vary greatly on where you are and what you are doing. So for example, if you are waiting for something you might ask how long they’ve been waiting. Or if you are at a show or an event you might ask if they’ve seen the performer or speaker before. “CONVERSATIONS” is about begging for attention. Whether that be from someone in particular or more generally. It’s summed up by the lyrics in the hook “Conversations I could never get enough; Silence aching my bones.”

“Conversations,” like much of the artist’s growing discography, is inherently difficult to perfectly place or define. The traces of ‘90s alternative, emo rap, hip-hop and pop radio-friendly fusion can certainly be traced, but no one umbrella term completely captures Aries’ nostalgically novel sound, and perhaps he likes it better that way. Listen to “Conversations” below: CONVERSATIONS. Aries. In open-domain conversational systems, common-sense knowledge is important for establishing effective interactions, since socially shared commonsense knowledge is the set of background information people intended to know and use during conversation [Minsky, 1991; Markova et al., 2007; Speer and Havasi, 2012; Souto, 2015]. However, these models tend to generate generic responses, which are unable to respond appropriately and informatively in most cases, because it is challenging to learn semantic interactions merely from conversational data [Ghazvininejad et al., 2017] without deep understanding of user input, and the background knowledge and the context of conversation.