

Rise of the Tech Conference

By Gabrielle Montoute

In 1967, the first mainstream tech conference was held at the Hilton and Americana hotels in New York City. The Consumer Electronics Show was an offshoot of The Chicago Music Show, which at the time was the only place to show off the newest electronics. At the first CES, there were only fourteen exhibitors, showing off everything from refrigerators to car alarms, to landline telephones. It wasn't until 1970, when the world would be introduced to the development and design of the first VCR, that the show would begin to resemble a modern tech conference.

In 1975, Atari was ready to show off its new gaming console: a little black and gray box that allowed you to play the arcade game Pong on a home television. Atari officially introduced its new product to the world at CES and tech conferences would never be the same. Three years later CES officially moves to Las Vegas, and we saw early home computers, followed by the first CD player, the portable camcorder, the Commodore 64, the Nintendo Entertainment System, and Tetris. In 1990, a record number of journalists showed up to the conference and greatly outnumbered consumer attendees. Tech was making big headlines and newspapers from all over the world wanted a piece of the action.

In the same year, the six-year-old TED Conference had its first successful run. Today, the global TED event has a broad focus on everything from poetry to space travel, but in 1990 the invitation only event exclusively emphasised technology and design. When TED began posting their TedTalks online in 2006, there were a mere 6 videos, but by 2016 that number has grown to over 2000. TED has also started an initiative called TEDx, where anyone can get a free TED license and host their own TedTalk. Today there are over 30,000 TEDx Talks posted to the TED website.

Around the same time as TED's inaugural year, the South By Southwest festival quickly growing in popularity, and in 1994, it finally added a "Multimedia" event, focused on the future of media and technology. The event, now called "Interactive," would eventually become one of the major draws of the SXSW festival, presenting lectures, demonstrations, and keynotes on everything from new tech, to artificial intelligence, to social media. SXSW also launched the SXSW Accelerator pitch competition to help foster the startup community and helped to introduce the world to apps like Instagram, Pinterest, and Uber.

Meanwhile, gaming division of CES broke off to create their own tech conference called the Electronic Entertainment Expo, or E3. They moved their headquarters to the Los Angeles Convention Center and closed the show to the public, inviting thousands of journalists and

publications to attend the event. At this first conference in 1995, 40,000 people attended to watch the likes of Sega, Nintendo, Atari and Sony announce brand new consoles, games and peripherals that would go on to become legendary and industry-defining pieces of tech. Now, twenty-one years later, attendance has reached 52,000 attendees, and 300+ exhibitors. Perhaps the largest change from the humble beginnings of CES and E3 are the five major press conferences livestreamed on Twitch and Youtube to over a million people around the world.

Today, tech conferences of all kinds are held throughout the year all over the world. If you want to learn new skills, gain inspiration, or even get a job, tech conferences offer the resources and opportunities to do so. In the last several years, tech conferences with specific focuses have begun to pop up, Journalism Interactive, held annually Maryland, focuses on digital storytelling and journalistic ventures while the Forbes Women's Summit focuses on uplifting women in the historically male-dominated STEM fields. As tech and culture move ever forward, the importance of the tech conference becomes clear: sharing information, knowledge, and ideas with like-minded individuals creates a forum on the world's stage that allows technology to advance.