

A Renaissance Technical Communicator: A Conversation with David Pogue

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DAVID POGUE IS a technical communicator with an unconventional career. He has been incredibly successful at the traditional—he is the author of over 50 technical books, with 3 million copies in print—as well as an award-winning blogger. But he didn't stop at the conventional; David's talent and humor led him to success in other outlets. In newspapers, he was the technology columnist at the *New York Times* for 13 years. On TV, he is the Emmy award-winning tech correspondent for *CBS News Sunday Morning*, the host of three PBS science shows and *It's All Geek to Me* on the Science Channel. On the Web, he is the founder and editor of *Yahoo! Tech*. In magazines, he is a monthly columnist for *Scientific American*. David has given three TED Talks, one of which inspired a new series of books, *Pogue's Basics*. A popular conference speaker, he has keynoted the STC Summit twice, and has been named an Honorary Fellow of STC. I was in the audience for both of David's Summit keynotes and had the pleasure of meeting him; in fact, after his second keynote, I escorted him out of the venue so he wouldn't miss the plane to his wedding. He took the time to talk to every attendee who wanted to chat, posed for selfies, and signed books and magazines. He undoubtedly would have made it to the church on time without me, but it was a treat to watch him earnestly greet his fellow technical communicators with such charm and grace. David's famous cat, Wilbur, joined us during our Skype video chat for this interview.

Nicky Bleiel: David, you graduated from Yale with a Bachelor's in Music, and you actually spent 10 years in the world of Broadway musicals. You were a conductor and an arranger. You were on the business side in music licensing. How did studying music and your time in that industry prepare you for the career you have right now?

David Pogue: It doesn't seem like a very logical connection, does it? Well, there's two things. First of all, there's the fairly well-established connection between music and technical subjects. Many doctors are also musicians, for example,



many mathematicians. Something about these pursuits both being rule-based and yet creative within those rules.

The more practical answer is that, in about 1987, I really wanted this piece of software called *Finale* that had come out. It was sheet music software, and they were charging \$1,000 for the floppy disk. Of course, I couldn't afford that much money for a piece of software, but at the time I was a member of the New York Mac Users Group. The editor for our little eight-page newsletter said, "Why don't you tell the company you're a reviewer, and they'll have to send you a free copy?"

I did, and they did, and I got a free copy of *Finale* and reviewed it, and I kept doing that. I just couldn't believe it was that easy. After a year or so, that same newsletter editor, to whom I think I owe my entire career, said, "You know, you could actually be making money out of this, if you sent your sample writings to the glossy computer magazines and proposed reviewing for them."

That's what I did. "Macworld" magazine hired me, and I wrote for them for 13 years.

Nicky: Did that lead you into the idea of creating the "Missing Manual" series? That was one of your first big successes.

David: Before that, I started writing the *Dummies* books. There was at the time only one *Dummies* book. It was *DOS for Dummies*, this completely brilliant book by Dan Gookin.

The independent book stores sold millions of those *DOS for Dummies* books. My book, *Macs for Dummies*, was the second book in the *Dummies* series, and now there's four or five hundred different titles.

I wound up doing seven of the *Dummies* books in my time. The question came up, "Well, maybe I should start my own series, do it the way I would do it, have complete control, and pick the topics I want." That's how the Missing Manual series was born in 1999.

Nicky: There are over a hundred titles in that series right now. You wrote 30 or so, as far as I could tell.

David: By the end there were 120 different titles. They just recently discontinued printing the Missing Manuals, except for the ones that I write. There's a topic for the STC to discuss, if they haven't already. People are, by and large, not buying printed computer books anymore. A number of the smaller presses have actually closed their doors.

O'Reilly, my press, hasn't shut down. They've had a lot of other businesses, but they have decided to stop doing the paper Missing Manuals, except for Mac, Windows, iPhone, the ones that I do. I think it's because—I've seen it in my own children—when they want to learn how to use a piece of software or learn something technical, they go to YouTube and type in "setting up a printer," or "downloading a YouTube video," or whatever it is they need to know.

Technical documentation has, by and large, moved online and gone to free, like everything else. It's an interesting shift. Fortunately, it doesn't cripple me because I have a number of other things going on, but it is interesting, and a little bit bittersweet for me to see the computer book industry that served me so well fizzling down.

Nicky: Around the same time that you started the Missing Manual series, and you had already written all these *Dummies* books, you ended up becoming a columnist at *The New York Times*. How did you end up there?

David: That was a little more straightforward. Peter Lewis, the guy who was writing the "Consumer Tech" column, left *The Times*. He took a job elsewhere, so they were looking for somebody new.

It had been my observation for decades that people don't know how to use even the most important features of the tech they have.



David Pogue bringing down the house as STC Summit keynote

When they put out feelers, my name came up a few times. It was a long process. I wrote four sample columns, I had interviews with every editor, all the way up to the editor-in-chief, and then it was the most anticlimactic thing you can imagine. One day, the tech editor said, "Hey David, we're going to print one of those sample columns that you wrote for us, and, you know, if it's OK with you, we'll just keep going like that." "You mean I got to the job?" That's how it happened. I wrote that column for 13 years.

Nicky: One of the other things you've done—not a lot of people know this—is you've been an advocate for tech consumers. What's your favorite triumph on behalf of consumers?

David: I think my favorite one involved Verizon Wireless. An employee within the corporation actually leaked to me something very underhanded that the company was doing. In the days before smartphones, as we know them today, every flip phone had that four-way controller—up, down, left, right—and if you wanted to use the Internet, you were to press the up button, and they would charge you two dollars for going onto the Internet.

Verizon said you weren't actually billed until you hit "OK" in a confirmation screen, but this person was telling me that, in fact, "No, anyone who hit the Up button, out of the 10s of millions of Verizon customers, was instantly billed two dollars every time they hit that button, even by accident."

If you complained to the company, they would've cheerfully refunded the two dollars, but of course, the huge majority did not notice and didn't bother. I wrote about this, and I tried it on my own phone, and confirmed it. Verizon said publicly, "Now, wait a minute, wait a minute, that's not true. You have to then approve a confirmation screen," and that turned out not to be true.

By this time the FCC was involved. They did an investigation, and wound up concluding that, in fact, Verizon was defrauding its customers, and knew about this, and levied what was then the highest fine ever levied by the FCC.

It was something like \$90 million, plus millions more in refunds to Verizon's customers.

Verizon was, of course, hopping mad at me and *The New York Times*, just absolutely livid. I believe they pulled their advertising from *The New York Times* for a year or more out of retaliation. They were just furious, but to me, it felt good. It felt like, "Just 'cause you're big and confusing doesn't mean that the little guy has to lose."

Again, I really owe it to the mole who leaked this information to me, but I was the platform that amplified it.

Nicky: That's really cool. That story has everything. It has federal agencies, it has the leak. Wow, all you had to do was add a parking garage. That's a reference only certain people would get.

Among other successes you've had, you've done three TED Talks. I think most people would say just getting asked to do one TED Talk is the pinnacle of your career. How did you get the first one?

David: The very first one was, I think, 2007. [Editor's note: The first Ted Talks were in 2006 (https://www.ted.com/playlists/168/the_first_6_ted_talks_ever).] I lucked into that, because the number two guy at TED at the time was my Yale dorm mate. He lived down the hall, and we had been buddies in college. He somehow thought I would be a good speaker. I had never heard of TED at the time. Not many people have heard of TED in 2007.

What's really interesting is that that was the year that TED first experimented with putting videos of the talks online. They started with a set of six. One of them was Al Gore, and one of them was mine, which is a complete lucky karma chunk falling into my lap.

From that first video being on the Web for free sprang this entire speaking career.

Nicky: Something else came from one of your TED talks. Your third one inspired your latest set of best-selling books. So far you have two—*Pogue's Basics: Tech* and *Pogue's Basics: Life*. I read that in the Fall there's going to be *Pogue's Basics: Money*.

David: The *Pogue's Basics* book was many years in coming. It had been my observation for decades that people don't know how to use even the most important features of the tech they have. It started when I was watching some 23-year-old receptionist in an office one day in the 90s trying to select a word in Microsoft Word by dragging across it with the mouse.

She would go a little bit too high and highlight the whole line above it, say "Darn it!," try again, and she'd highlight the whole line below. I finally jumped up and said, "Don't you know you can double-click on the word?", and she was, "Oh my God!"

No one had ever taught her, and who would? There's no driver's ed for tech. There's no minimum boot camp.

There's no government pamphlet. There's no core curriculum in the world, so how are you supposed to know that kind of stuff?

You pick it up, you watch other people doing it, you stumble onto it. I thought that somebody should go through the thousands of features and pluck out the hundred that you really should know about your phone, your computer, email, and the Web, and so on.

That was the objective of the TED Talk. It was "10 Tips in Seven Minutes that You Really Should Know About Your Phone." Every time I described one, like "Hitting the on-screen space bar twice at the end of a sentence, to get a period, a space, and an automatically capitalized next word," things like that. Every time I went through this, the whole audience would go, "Oh!"

I could see them all writing stuff down, and so I thought, all right, this needs to be a book. It was never meant to be a series. It was just a one-off thing. It hit *The New York Times* Best Seller list, which I had never done after all those books, and then the conversation went, "Well, maybe there should be a sequel."

That's what the second book is, *Pogue's Basics: Life*, which expands the scope a bit to life in general—food, home, travel, cars, clothing, and people. It's life hacks, but it's really clever ones. The third one, *Pogue's Basics: Money*, which I think may, to my great surprise, be the book I was born to write, more than any of those others. We are leaving money on the table, everywhere we look, there's not a single area of life where you're not probably overpaying.

Nicky: I think everyone would like to hear an overview of your writing process. How do you start a new book? How do you work out the structure? How do you research it?"

David: It's not especially fancy. I'm a very fast writer, and I write like I talk. For years, I dictated. I actually had a wrist problem and wound up dictating everything I wrote. It starts with an outline, and the outline covers the chapter breakdowns, and then the main topics. The tertiary heads I come up with as I'm writing.

For computer software or phones, it's actually not so difficult. It's not like writing a novel where there is no prescribed structure. There's definitely a structure if you want to cover the entirety of an operating system. You have to fit everything into that outline somewhere, and you know if you're missing a piece, and you know if you've added too many pieces.

It's a combination of pounding away, holding down keys, and testing things myself. Frequently, I resort to emailing the PR people for help. They cheerfully go to the engineers and get the answers for me, which is a huge blessing for tech writers writing books.

Nicky: You've done all this TV work. You're a tech correspondent for *CBS News Sunday Morning*, you've hosted three PBS shows—*NOVA ScienceNOW*, *Making Stuff* specials,

Hunting the Elements. You've also done *It's All Geek to Me* for the Science channel. How does your experience as a technology writer come in to play when you work in front of the camera?

David: I guess everything that I'm doing on TV is in the same vein. It's documentation. It's taking that which is technical and abstruse and trying to explain it for a layman. That's all I do, in many different forms.

The *Sunday Morning* stuff and the *NOVA* stuff is explaining tech and science. So was the *Discovery* series. It's tremendously fun. It makes a great, great partner with the very solitary act of writing. TV is extremely collaborative. You hug and cry when the series is over. It makes a very good combo.

Nicky: You've won three Emmy Awards, two Webby Awards, and a Loeb Award for journalism. Which one are you proudest of?

David: I think it's probably that first Emmy, for a story that I did and wrote. It involved sitting in Google's atrium at their headquarters and playing a song parody on the grand piano they had there. I like to think that no other correspondent could have presented their story in quite that way, so that one was a big occasion for me, and it sits proudly on the piano in the living room.

Nicky: In 2013, you left the *New York Times*, and in 2014, there was a big splashy new entrance for you. You became the editor of the website, Yahoo! Tech.

David: Yahoo! had been approaching me all that summer of 2013, and I had been doing a weekly *Times* column for a very long time, 50 columns a year for 13 years. It's a lot, and Yahoo! was saying, "We want you to be a black box. We will give you money, manpower, resources, design help, and engineers. You make us something cool."

That was, of course, appealing to my creative side and to my ego, and it meant, for starters, that my columns could be much more fanciful in their presentation, with audio, video, and color pictures, and dozens of them. There's just no limit to the way I could present tech stories when I had multimedia and the Web at my command.

They told me that I could hire anyone I wanted, the best writers in the country, to be my colleagues, which I did. Yahoo! Tech became the first of Yahoo!'s digital magazines, as they called them.

Right now, my columns are appearing on both Yahoo! Tech and Yahoo! Finance. It's kind of a riot. You can tell from the numbers and the number of comments, that these are getting just colossal readership. If it's true that a writer wants to be read, then this is the ultimate.

Nicky: You've had a really interesting career path, and you are obviously respected in a lot of different fields.

Writing about technology started all of it, more or less, and explaining technology started all of it. In my opinion, being a technical communicator is your core.

David: That's right.

Nicky: How much satisfaction do you take in making users of all kinds—not just tech users—successful, and in basically being a teacher?

David: That is it. That is the core, and that is the ultimate payoff. More than any award or gig, the thing that makes me jump out of bed in the morning are those days when I get some email—and it happens maybe once a year—where somebody will say, "I got out of college, and I didn't know what I was doing. I was troubled, and I got one of your books, and I got so into this operating system that I became a Microsoft Certified 'whatever,'" or "I now am a Genius at the Apple Store, and I'm 22 and proud," stories like that.

Children—if I'm recognized on the street or in airports, by in large, it's because of the *NOVA* specials. I've now done 18 hours of *NOVA* specials. They were never intended to be children's shows, and yet somehow, I guess because I have a very juvenile sense of humor on these shows and in real life, kids, all the time on airplanes are like, "Mom, it's the *NOVA* guy."

It's just the most incredible, incredible feeling to know that maybe, just maybe, I've made a dent in this larger problem of kids losing interest in science.

Nicky: It's just been a pleasure talking to you, David, about your path and your career. I look forward to seeing you in your next TED Talk, or reading your next book, or whatever comes down the pike.

David: Well, thank you. I give a lot of talks, about 50 a year, but nothing, nowhere, have I ever felt so among my peeps as those two STC Conferences. We spoke the same language, faced the same concerns, deal with the public, think about the public the same way. It was an amazing experience, twice. So, thank you for that. **f**



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