

Sci Foo 2007 Gossip Liveblog

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[Original link](#)

Industry heavyweights [O'Reilly](#), [Google](#), and [Nature](#) come together to sponsor a science-focused version of O'Reilly's runaway success [FOO Camp](#), bringing together top people in the field to eat and gab and plot. Our correspondent on the scene at Google headquarters in Mountain View and the conference hotel in Sunnyvale (where Google purchased a room for every attendee) will be providing live updates on the famous and their doings.

Friday night

[Martha Stewart](#) is here with her boyfriend [Charles Simonyi](#). [Frank Wilczek](#) is just as friendly in person as on TV. Dinner with [Nat Torkington](#) and [Hal Varian](#). [James Randi](#) just told me to get glasses. [Esther](#) and [Freeman](#) are here — double Dyson decadence! [Paul Sereno](#), America's Most Photogenic Paleontologist looks photogenic in person too. [Jaron Lanier](#) seems to know everyone.

Kid looks past me to ask what the guy next to me does. I look miffed. He looks back at me and says “well, come on, everyone knows your story.”

[Tim O'Reilly](#) kicks things off by singing a duet of “I Feel Good”. [Ted Selker](#) gabs about our distractible mutual friend. [Dean Kamen](#) brags about the robots he's seen. [Lee Smolin](#). [Eugenie Scott](#) gets a round of applause. [Neal Stephenson](#) and [Kim Stanley Robinson](#) are sitting together. Lots of comic book artists. [Theodore Gray](#). [Chris Anderson](#). [Yossi Vardi](#) says hi. [Eric Drexler](#). [Vik Olliver](#) talks about his [self-replicating 3D printers](#). [Danny Hillis](#). [George Dyson](#) is also here. [Sergey Brin](#) says he likes neck stretches.

A quick glance makes it seem about 10% female, but Tim says it's more like 23%.

[Paul Sereno](#) brought a bunch of fossils. We're not supposed to blog them until he's published. [Drew Endy](#) talks about domesticating biotech and [a summer camp](#) where college freshmen do their own biotech engineering. [Felice Frankel](#) shows series of brilliant science photos from her work with G. M. Whitesides and promotes [imageandmeaning.org](#). [Saul Griffith](#) and [Jim McBride](#) show a series of diagrams to explain energy sources, paths, and usage. [Charles Simonyi](#) talks about his time in space. [Martha Stewart](#) talks about the food she made for him.

The hallways are full of people to talk to — I don't go for a minute before getting into a conversation. [Kovas Boguta](#) hints at his latest secret project.

[Sarah Brown](#) catches up. The famed [LH](#) shares her inexhaustible supply of *love*. [Daniel Chudnov](#) of the Library of Congress introduces himself and tells me about the ten terabytes of data they have at [Chronicling America](#). [Brady Forrest](#) tells me about the many conferences he worries about.

Saturday

[Martha](#) saw one of her subordinates eat food that's been out too long and worried that she would die of salmonella. [Vaughan Bell](#) tells me what it's like to study people with psychosis and delusions. A group at breakfast wonders who is the Richard Feynman and Carl Sagan of our era. CSI has driven so many people into forensics that colleges have started whole new programs because of it — can we do the same for the rest of science? “Science shows always show us at the university all day,” one complains. “How come they never show us at the pub or at meetings like this?”

In one session a group of people discuss their citizen science projects — attempts to let normal people assist them with science. Others talk about visualizing data and transporting huge swaths of it. Google security is frighteningly helpful. [Danny Hillis](#) talks in the hallway about buying land for his clock. [Jeff Hawkins](#) talks about his neocortical theory. [Eugenie Scott](#) speaks on the attacks on evolution. [Henry Gee](#) on the Jewish community in London: “People are shocked if their rabbi is not a practicing lesbian.”

I signed up to give a talk.

At lunch there was a fellow working on genetically evolving robots, using a 3D printer to make the robots. Zach Kaplan of [Inventables](#) had a big bag at the table, from which he kept pulling out the most amazing things — squishy magnets, plastic that expands in water, instant snow, erasable pens, and so on. It was hilariously fun. On the way back in my old friend [Chris Anderson](#) said hi and plugged his new startup with the inimitable [Adam Goldstein](#), [BookTour](#). Adam — say hi sometime!

Theo Gray [demos Mathematica 6](#). [Ted Kaehler](#), a lieutenant of [Alan Kay](#), demos the latest stuff from [Squeakland](#), which has similar demos but for kids and with less elegance. ([Dean Kamen](#) got very interested; presumably for [FIRST](#).) [Bjørn Lomborg](#) takes his [Copenhagen Consensus](#) show on the road. Hugh Rein-hoff tells how he diagnosed his daughter's congenital illness by sequencing her DNA to find the genetic mutation. (Harvard charges only \$3.50 a reaction!) “All the stuff you need these days is available on the Web,” he explains. “But the doctors get totally freaked out.”

The Google buildings are almost mazelike.

[George Dyson](#) has a standing-room-only talk on “Gödel and the Draft Board”. (It was already moved to a larger room once.) The rest of [the Dyson family](#) and [Martin Rees](#), President of the Royal Society, are among the numerous in

attendance. George Dyson gives a madcap tour of Gödel's attempts to become a full professor at the [Institute for Advanced Study](#) — a story of endless disappointments which Dyson manages to make quite funny. It's brilliant, if you can look past his standard bits of softheadedness. [Freeman Dyson](#) pipes in with stories from his [Neal Stephenson](#) notes that Gödel went on to work on lonely philosophical projects and George suggests that the open-ended freedom of the Institute was a bit of a mistake. [Tim O'Reilly](#) wonders if this is a more general lesson. "I once paid [Larry Wall](#) a salary to do ... basically whatever he wanted for a year," he said. "I worry that it was the worst thing that ever happened to the Perl community, because that was when [Perl 6](#) turned into what someone called a performance art project."

Martha Stewart fills a big room speaking on the Paperless Home. "I may not look like it," she says, "but I'm the typical homemaker. I have a dog, I have a daughter, I have a garden, I have a farm, and I do—or I did it all myself." And as a homemaker, she's convinced homes need to become computerized. Not too computerized, of course — not like those crazy folks at MIT who want to have refrigerators that talk and coffee makers that do the same thing every day. Stewart wants to preserve traditions too. So she's going to build tools to organize the ultra-tedious tasks of life. She's very bright, hard-headed, and engaging. "So exhausting," says one woman upon the session's conclusion. "We pay people to do that sort of work."

[Dalton Conley](#), the persecuted sociologist, and his arthack wife [Natalie Jeremijenko](#) gab at dinner. Dean Kamen gesticulates wildly and talks about watching beautiful women who bend down to pick things up. Nat Torkington discusses how O'Reilly refused to censor [his video demonstration of New Zealand culture](#). [Chris DiBona](#) admits he just works at Google (as a grown-up!) so that he can do science tourism. Theo Gray shows me the 3D Table of the Elements he printed out using a lenticular.

The Internet here is really wonky.

[Timo Hannay](#) of *Nature* introduces himself and welcomes me, giving some clues as to why I was invited. He asks me to explain [Science that Matters](#), which is an odd situation. My proud co-author [Jim Hendler](#) gives a talk on the future of science publishing. [Paul Ginsparg](#) ducks out to look at [Howtoons](#), where [Saul Griffith](#), who is dating Tim's daughter [Arwen O'Reilly](#), explains that they try to combine emotional stories to attract girls and action at a distance (guns, explodey-things, etc.) to attract boys, and telling the real stories behind discoveries to attract all. Theo Gray talks about the liability issues involved in publishing [his Popular Science column](#). They made sure to get [Judith Regan](#) as their publisher so that they could print all sorts of dangerous stuff in their book, only to have her sacked because of the [O.J. Simpson debacle](#). The conversation then devolved into explodey-things you can make at home. But [the book](#) should be out soon. It looks great.

The WiFi at the conference hotel [adds ads to pages](#). Wow, is that annoying.

Sunday

[Eric Bonabeau](#) apologized for being rude to me the other day and explained what his company does — predict human behavior based on modeling cognitive biases. “Clearly people aren’t rational economic actors,” he explained. “Just look at [Quinn Norton](#).”

Someone whose name I didn’t catch talks about finding which genetic differences increase your risk for getting a particular disease. To get 1x coverage of your genome from [Celera](#) costs only \$100,000 and [23andMe](#) hopes to do portions of your gene for \$1,000. And just doing portions costs tens of dollars. You can [browse the genome](#) of [Jim Watson](#) and find the genetic mutations unique to him. “Perhaps that mutation explains the *extreme* sexism,” jokes [Paul Ginsparg](#). He shows [a large study of genetic risk factors](#) and examines Watson to see if he’s at risk.

I give my talk. When I start, about 4 people are there, but I charge ahead and 15 or so more people show up. I give a demo of [Open Library](#), which most people miss because they came late. Then we discuss how to open the scientific literature. Ginsparg says that studies have found that about a third of all papers, preferentially high-impact papers, are available for free online. We learn about the ways people keep online bibliographies (including the Drupal modules involved). And someone else suggests that the [Wellcome Trust](#) just buy Elsevier and open it up.

[Natalie](#) helps [Dalton](#) set up his computer for their joint session, in which they make “somewhat opposite arguments”. (They look much less cool when they’re wearing casual clothing.) He covers the problems in studying [his book on birth order](#). He shows that blacks who were called for the draft are less likely to die in later years (“which I was shocked about”), which he proposes is because the military is the most color-blind institution (he suggests the black-white test score gap is smaller there too). He notes that women’s groups prefer the voting records of politicians with daughters (for a potential natural experiment). Roommate lottery finds that each point loss in GPA costs you .25 points and that roommate drinking is a major influence. But once the effects are known, people adjust their social behavior. Thus social scientists are on a treadmill. [Carl Bergstrom](#) says he sees similar patterns in evolution — even if the animals are at a draw, you can see if the genome is under heavy selection.

[Natalie](#) talks about her [Urban Space Station project](#) which uses closed systems engineering to create safe urban spaces. Attached she’ll have a lab, one project of which is the Environmental Health Clinic, where people come with environmental problems and get prescriptions for things to do to help improve their world. One prescription: [the greenlight](#).

I wanted to get into a fight with Dalton about the metareliability of these natural experiments but couldn’t find him — he and Natalie were too busy taking care of two adorable children. At lunch I explained Open Library to some folks from

Nature, then got involved in a discussion making fun of Stephen Wolfram with Chris DiBona and others. I learned the meaning of my Google New York shirt. Jim McBride told me how much he liked STM (which I saw on some other peoples' feed readers) and invited me up to their abandoned air traffic control tower. Paul Ginsparg introduced me to [Michael Kurtz](#) of ADS.

Tim gives the closing speech: he wants to hear what new connections were made, that's his metric for success. Afterwards, I get in a great conversation with Carl Bergstrom who tells me about new features on his [Eigenfactor](#) site. Then I bump into [Bjørn Lomborg](#), who is amazed I know about the Copenhagen Consensus. He's been giving copies of his new book to everyone within throwing distance and stops to amicably persuade me that we should spend less on stopping global warming. Incredibly friendly guy — imagine the lead of *Thank You For Smoking* but a surfer. I talked to a lot of other people but I don't remember the details.

The Google people are packing up the camping tents and mats. [Tamara Munzner](#) demos some of her visualization software. She gave me and others a ride. [Ezeiz Lieberman](#) told me about his work modeling versions of evolution in which structural forces cause random drift to tie with fitness selection and his wife Aviva Presser told me about her work investigating methylation in gene sequences.

It was an incredible conference. Probably the best I've been to (although that's not saying much).

More...

View [photos on Flickr](#).

Also, be sure to check out [my comments on the Foo Camp format and suggestions for improving it](#).