

Recommendations for future #scifoo invitees

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Abstract

I received an invitation to SciFoo (a “Science Friends of O’Reilly” meeting) in the beginning of April this year. I was aware of the hype around this “unconference” and several people I knew had already participated, so at first I [...] [↓ Read the rest of this entry...](#)

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I received an invitation to SciFoo (a “Science Friends of [O’Reilly](#)” meeting) in the beginning of April this year. I was aware of the hype around this “unconference” and several people I knew had already participated, so at first I was rather excited and flattered about the invitation. However, I was in Germany, the meeting was at Google headquarters in Palo Alto, California and the flight was not covered. This meant anything from 1500-2000€ from my meager research budget would have to be spent on this trip. I didn’t know enough to justify that expense. This is my account to help others in this situation make an informed decision.

The invitation sure didn’t pull any punches in making sure I understood what an honor it was to be invited to this event:

Sci Foo Camper Lord Martin Rees, Astronomer Royal, remarked, “Well I suppose it’s what you call a happening or a sort of mini Woodstock of the Mind as it were, and what I learnt from this is exciting developments in a whole range of subjects, particularly from people whom one doesn’t normally encounter. I think it’s very important to realize that intellectual activity is not just what one’s academics do, it’s what many other people do.”

[...]

The Sci Foo format creates a unique opportunity to explore topics that transcend traditional boundaries, and discussions are of a kind that happens at the best conferences during breaks and late into the night.

I started looking around for reports of how previous attendees described the meeting. I found [this one](#), who seemed to confirm my suspicions:

Sci Foo Camp embodies this tension between openness and exclusivity. Once there, everyone is equal, but few are called to what is a select networking opportunity. Ask people why they came and, if they are honest, they talk about being flattered.

Absolutely: SciFoo reeks sufficiently of Glam that you should definitely attend if you don’t have tenure (Nature Magazine and their digital technology branch Digital Science are listed among its sponsors). Moreover, there are many really smart and interesting, some famous and a whole bunch of very well-connected attendees at scifoo, which can be very helpful on the road towards tenure. So in that case, it’s a no-brainer:

But the invitation to attend also seems like an opportunity to enter a secret society, an inner circle of thinkers selected by a cadre of rich and powerful players in the online world. [...] Without the networking incentive, I’m not sure I would have been able to justify the huge expense of jetting out to California.

Moreover, you get to participate in the creation of the program, since this is an unconference: you get to claim one (or several) spots on the agenda and fill it with whatever you are passionate about. This means an unconference is a perfect opportunity for self-promotion: perform well in a couple of exciting sessions you organize and you have the opportunity to

impress yourself into the memory of a whole bunch of potential future employers or other powerful enablers for future support.

However, I have tenure and the money spent on the trip will be missing both for my experiments and for those of my postdoc, my graduate student and the undergraduates. So neither the Glam factor nor the networking opportunity is a prime directive any more. On the other hand:

campers are invited to Sci Foo only because they have their own specialisations. Depth is what you bring, breadth is what you take away. The whole premise of these intense intellectual mash-ups is that people are doing all sort of interesting things but, because they work within their own fields, there is not enough cross-fertilisation.

That sounds very enticing and the entire article is generally very positive and upbeat, despite the criticism it contains. So I went and asked our technician what the budget had to say. Her answer was that the budget looked great and I shouldn't worry about the 2k€ and have a good time over there. My wife also said it may be an interesting experience and since I was curious to form my own opinion rather than reading about scifoo, I booked the flight after a total of 20 days of deliberation. However, to be sure I definitely would get plenty of real science out of the trip no matter how scifoo turned out to be, I set up visits to the [Clandinin](#) and [Poldrack](#) labs at Stanford.

Don't expect to take a whole lot of new information back home from scifoo. The description of scifoo in the invitation mentioned that it's a conference of coffee-break discussions, so expect more fun intellectual titillation than deep, novel insights. The instructions and descriptions you find about scifoo are dead on and the organizers are experienced in delivering the scifoo look and feel. Scifoo certainly was very well organized. A big thank you to the many people who helped make this event so perfectly orchestrated.

The meeting certainly was intellectually stimulating with a diverse group of scientists from astrophysics to psychology, rendering every session, every break and every meal making you feel like you're participating in the recording of one of those science podcasts I so love to listen to. Like in a podcast, you will see very little actual scientific data: presentations are frowned upon and interactive discussions encouraged. Maybe only 2-3 of the dozen or so hour-long sessions I attended had any form of data in them, and that's on purpose. You still get to hear a lot about all kinds of exciting discoveries and developments. If you thirst for more cold, hard data than short accounts of 'super awesome' discoveries, scifoo is not for you.

While the unconference format is a great way to let the attendees determine what they want to spend their time on and hence allow those in need to network and market themselves, there is an in hindsight rather obvious flip side, which I only realized when I attempted to participate in the creation of the program.

On the evening before the conference, the 250 or so attendees all flock to panels on which to paste post-it notes with their titles and names for sessions. I ellbowed my way through the knot of people in front of the panels and stuck my title on one of the few remaining empty slots.

Every hour, there are about 6-8 parallel 1h sessions, so there was genuine competition for attendees. Only then dawned it on me that this automatically entails that those desperate for self-promotion will inevitably come to dominate the program. Not exclusively, of course, but when the program started to coalesce, the association I had when reading a lot of the titles was more that of clickbait than that of an intellectual delicacy: life extension, cold fusion, big data, aliens, social media, origami. I decided to take my session off to not stand in the way for those who had more urgent things to discuss.

I tried to stay away from what I judged to be the most 'clickbaity' titles and with the exception of the 2-3 sessions with data which I enjoyed the most, the other sessions fitted the scifoo description perfectly: heated discussions, brain storming, discoveries, science politics and some poking at deep problems all occurred in and between the sessions. In that respect, scifoo was exactly as described and I cannot say I was bored very often.

In hindsight also to be expected (and in my opinion an unavoidable price worth paying) was that some of the sessions felt like unprepared committee meetings with faculty where the first five minutes are really productive until someone accidentally mentions something that derails the meeting. Once the hour is over the participants are all left to wonder what this sessions now had actually been about.

Similarly, in sessions where deep question do start to be tackled, no significant inroads can be made in the short time frame of an hour – but also that is intentional, as far as I understood. This format is bound to be diverse in all kinds of ways, with sessions varying a lot. This is not necessarily a bad thing.

One of my favorite parts at meetings with a heavy digital slant is to meet people in person which I have so far only met online. I always thoroughly enjoy the inevitable discrepancy between how I thought the people may look like and their actual appearance. Being able to immediately connect with someone one has met for the first time because of the common foundation built online sometimes over years is a kick I can't get enough of. Also at scifoo I've had the privilege to meet several individuals whose opinions, work or intelligence I admire, always a priceless opportunity. In addition, I also met several exciting scientists from other fields with whom I would love to stay in touch, but I guess this does not come to anyone's surprise at this point?

In total, only a single one of the sessions I attended was truly unbearable. As I work on [spontaneous behavior](#) in the absence of external stimuli, I was intrigued by a session titled "what is the smallest unit of creativity?". On the occasion of an invited article for an art exhibition, I had previously [contemplated](#) about the potential connection between an artist in front of an empty canvas and our animals in a homogeneously white environment, so I thought this might be interesting.

The person running the session couldn't have started out any worse: while mentioning something about his molecular DNA work, he exclaimed that the work of his lab had been on *Playboy* recently. After a slightly too long pause to observe the effect these obviously awe-inspiring news would have on us mere mortals, he hastened to state that before that this work

had of course been in *Science* (capital S). I had to bite my lips to not interject “and tomorrow on Retractionwatch?”. In the ensuing monologue, he kept pontificating without any real arguments that he thought chance was actually ruling the world and that biology/evolution/brains were always trying to move way from determinism towards randomness. That sort of sounded like this may lead down my alley after all and since I’m such a sucker for confirmation bias I felt I needed to cut the fella some slack. However, I grew increasingly uneasy when he went on to proclaim that ideas must be some sort of chemical, because everything in biology is some chemical (looking for affirmation from the audience that never came). It didn’t help that his next assertion was that the most energy gets released when two thoughts from different domains collide. At about halfway through the session I finally had to leave at the point where he detailed that in the many instances when he would have a brilliant idea (his demeanor implying that he was referring to those ideas too brilliant for the riffraff in his audience to ever experience), he always just had to laugh. In order to make us intellectually challenged understand the profoundness of what he had just said, he had to let out the longest, loudest, most embarrassingly awkward false laugh I have ever heard and top it off with a “oh, it’s just so brilliant!”.

Obviously, this session is not representative, but maybe it’s not completely unexpected in an environment that combines self-promotion with the explicit encouragement to organize sessions on topics you have no expertise whatsoever in.

In total, I don’t regret coming at all. It was a little like an exclusive, weekend-long cocktail party, with smart people who always had something intelligent, witty and novel to contribute. All in all, I had a lot of fun and some of the science here and in the labs in Stanford probably justify the dent in our research budget. If I were based in the Bay Area (or they covered the flights), I’d even accept a second invitation, if ever there were one (probably not after this post, lol). Given the immense effort it takes to come to scifoo from Germany on my own budget, I think once would be enough for me, though.

I hope I’ve been able to cover both the pros and cons of this event from my perspective in a way that does justice to the honorable intentions of the organizers and generous sponsors while helping future invitees make up their mind about attending.