

By Kathleen M. Raven

In 2005, two bright-eyed friends, sipping coffee in North Carolina's Research Triangle, hatched a plan. Why not gather professionals and amateurs of all stripes, under the heading "science online," in a cozy space with free-flowing caffeine and see what happens? [Bora Zivkovic](#) and [Anton Zuiker](#) (later joined by [Karyn Traphagen](#)) could not have known that the wire they tapped would explode to life. Seven years later—a short time period in the life of any conference—[ScienceOnline](#) has morphed from an obscure meeting to an event worthy of a mention in [The New York Times](#) and a post on [BoingBoing](#). With the latter being, perhaps, a bigger deal.

The reason the ScienceOnline conference—or "[unconference](#)," the category its organizers prefer (it *is* better nomenclature, you'll see)—rocketed to recognition might have something to do with the possibilities on hand each year. The party thrown last month at North Carolina State University's McKimmon Conference Center was no exception. For example, conference-goers could strap their mobile devices and laptops onto one of the [fastest](#) broadband Internet connections in America. Ready, set, tweet! If you were torn between which concurrent session to attend, your heart leapt at the realization that your colleagues, equipped with otherworldly tweeting abilities, actually [live-tweeted](#) every single session, dutifully including the appropriate hashtag—#scio12—on each tweet. With such insightful tweeting, a person really could be in two places at once. Other possibilities included: feeling surprisingly [intimate](#) with the 449 other conference attendees; delightfully drowning yourself in more [information](#) than you ever thought possible; marveling at the on-the-fly [art](#) produced by talented artists; and, certainly not least, taking home important lessons about [communicating](#) medicine and science to the public.

Wait, we're talking about a conference/unconference, right? Doesn't this seem a bit... hyperbolic? You should [ask](#) Paul Raeburn of Knight Science Journalism Tracker that question. (Hint: He would probably agree the hype is fair and warranted.) And if so many people are pumped about the conference, then why only 450 total attendees? And now we arrive at one of the most rare and gifted qualities of this particular conference: you don't have to physically be there to share and participate in the excitement and learning. Ideally you are there, sharing a pint with a fellow blogger or discussing the merits of citizen science over a muffin at breakfast. But anyone who's interested in science online can get involved. Now. The ScienceOnline 2013 planning [wiki](#) is already posted!

Another attribute of the annual event that contributes to its "unconference" nature is the lack of a common, overarching theme. This translates to wide and varying session topics—from science tattoos (yep, [Carl Zimmer](#) wrote the book on 'em) to preserving digital [science](#) online. The professionals and amateurs that Anton and Bora originally targeted can still choose from the dim-sum of science-related topics

available. The variety also makes summarizing the contents of ScienceOnline quite difficult. Instead of more description, I'd like to make a prediction: Science journalists will be seeing (and doing) more reporting based on data journalism and the semantic web. Two recent graduates from New York University's science writing program showcased the possibilities of how to [turn data into art](#) during one session. In another discussion, two researchers described a Matrix-like world behind the world wide web: the Semantic Web. Here's an [example](#) of Semantic Web in action. If you're curious to learn more about ScienceOnline, be sure to check out a complete listing of the conference experience [here](#).

This was my second consecutive year attending the three-day mad dash. And there's something extremely reassuring about the classic, core values that continue to be the force behind excellent science communication online: writing/video/audio should be **clear, factual** and **compelling**.