This year’s Foo Camp, held in early October, was extraordinary for many reasons, but perhaps mostly for its structure—or lack thereof. Tim O’Reilly, Foo’s founder, made sure that basics like food, showers, and meeting space were available, but then quickly turned over the weekend’s agenda to the geeks (literally—there was no agenda until Friday night, when the attendees made one up on the fly). The idea: Get 200 or so smart folks with a lot in common together in one place at one time, let them pitch tents, toss in a Wi-Fi network, and see what happens. Turns out, quite a lot.

At Foo, I was about as likely to bump into a founder of Google (both were there) as I was a vice chairman of Warburg Pincus. Tim Bray, a co-inventor of XML, huddled with Yahoo engineer Jeremy Zawodny and Nutch founder Doug Cutting, and in no time they had posited a new approach to stopping spam (for details, head to www.tbray.org/ongoing/). Later, Zawodny teamed up with David Sifry, the founder and CEO of Technorati, a popular search engine for blogs, and others to propose a new way to organize the thousands of newsfeeds available from media outlets around the world. The new standard they hacked up, FDML, may well be adopted by major corporations and news outlets by the time this column hits newsstands.

Simon Cozens, an author and programmer from England, presented Twingle, a program that helps you find things in your e-mail archives (who doesn’t need that?).

What happens when 200 hackers and visionaries camp out in the hills of Northern California? If you have a stake in the future of business, you’ll want to find out.

The Geeks Are All Right

What works

California’s idea to have a stake in the future of business, you’ll want to find out.