

Strange Technology at the Mini Maker Faire

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The tweletype.

The **teletype** was a great invention that helped speed the global flow of news throughout much of the 20th century. Twitter, arguably also a great invention, is now helping change the way news travels in the 21st. But the **tweletype**, a combination of the two, is neither great nor useless. It's not that it falls somewhere between the two extremes; in reality, it doesn't even have a place on that continuum.

Its inventor, Michael Gallant of the Montreal hackerspace **Foulab**, demonstrated it at Saturday's **Mini Maker Faire**, at the Evergreen Brick Works. (It was "mini" because it was locally organized. Plain-old **Maker Faire** is a series of major festivals sponsored by **Make Magazine**.)

The tweletype is a four-foot-tall, typewriter-like instrument made of sheet metal, with a mechanical keyboard and a complex, clockwork interior. "It's from 1964 and it's formerly NASA property," said Gallant.

Teletypes, when they were still in common use, transmitted text over telephone lines and radio, but Gallant figured out a way to hook this one up to the internet, and now whenever a user types out a message on the machine's scroll of yellow paper, that message gets relayed to a **Twitter account**. Even better, whenever someone sends an @-reply to the tweletype account, the machine automatically prints out the message with a satisfying CHUNKitta-CHUNKitta sound. Gallant's inspiration for creating the thing was uncomplicated. "I was like, 'Hey, I can do something silly with this,'" he said.



The Obama board.

The Mini Maker Faire was a convention consisting of a few dozen exhibitors who delight in making things like the tweletype in their spare time. Each group of participants had a folding table with their inventions displayed, science-fair style. Another exhibitor, Ashley Lewis, had hacked a Casio keyboard to play words and phrases from Barack Obama's inaugural address instead of musical notes, as part of her third-year project for Ryerson's new media program. Faire attendees pressed the keys in sequences to produce little Obama-themed sound collages. "Everyone's always looking for the words 'we,' 'power,' and 'change,'" Lewis said.

But if the Faire had a poster human, it was probably Bernie Rohde, a former electrician with gray, bushy hair, who now makes sculptures out of digital detritus. He showed off one of his creations, a copper, pole-like object with wires trailing down it like hair. There were **seven-segment displays** dangling from the ends of some of the hair, and according to Rohde, if read in a certain sequence, they'd tell the time. "The thing about time is that our technology is way too precise," he explained. "I'm making fun of timekeeping."

These days, he's looking to get out of the timekeeping business altogether. "Lately," he said, "I'm less interested in functional things."

Photos by Christopher Drost/Torontoist.
