

AP modernizes with robojournalism

► BY CHRIS BENNETT CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Robojournalism is a concept so fresh to the newsroom that disagreement exists on spelling and phrasing.

Robo-journalism? Robojournalism? Robot journalism? The spelling and phrasing might still not be sorted by the time most realize the concept of computers generating stories is part of life in the newsroom.

The Associated Press started using a system developed by Automated Insights in the summer of 2014. The Associated Press currently uses robojournalism to generate earnings stories and some sports stories.

CEO Robbie Allen founded Automated Insights in 2007. According to James Kotecki, head of communications at Automated Insights, Allen saw opportunity at the intersection of computer automation and the process humans go through mentally when writing.

The company started in sports statistics and today operates in industries including finance, personal fitness, consumer content, business intelligence and website analytics.

Philana Patterson, assistant business editor at the Associated Press, earned the task of integrating Automated Insight's Wordsmith program into the venerated company's news operation. Patterson started with AP in 2007 and has been in business journalism since 1994.

"We had already been doing some automated things previously," Patterson said. "The idea wasn't completely foreign.

"I was concerned that while earnings stories can often look very similar, there's a level of complexity that I just wasn't sure was going to work in an automated context."

According to Patterson, AP writes up to 4,250 earnings stories on companies in the United States and Canada each quarter, which equals roughly 18,000 stories per year.

The first earning stories generated using Automated Insight debuted in the late summer of 2014. Patterson said AP started working with Automated Insight's Wordsmith program in June of 2014.

AP distributed each story penned using Wordsmith with the tagline "This story was generated by Automated Insights." Patterson said getting to that point involved considerable work.

"When I first started working with them I was presented with mockups of what they could do, and it was pretty impressive," Patterson said. "The stories sounded like a person wrote them."

Patterson said the tone of the stories sounds familiar because journalists and newsroom personnel must manipulate and train the algorithm that drives Wordsmith to achieve the desired result.

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Automated Insights opens Wordsmith to everyone

► The technology used by the Associated Press and other outlets to automatically generate content is now available to anyone.

Automated Insights announced on Oct. 20 that the latest version of its Wordsmith platform is now available to anyone who wants to upload data and automate their own stories.

"It enables one person to write thousands of compelling stories in the time it usually takes to write just one," said James Kotecki, Head of Communications at Automated Insights. "There's no coding required, and anyone can use it. Wordsmith revolutionizes the way professionals write."

Automated Insights started in sports statistics, and today operates in industries including finance, personal fitness, consumer content, business intelligence and website analytics.

Automated Insights' technology is perhaps most notably used by the Associated Press to generate quarterly earnings stories.

Automated Insights is also used by Yahoo! to generate fantasy football recaps and by Allstate to develop sales summaries.

"Reporters frequently ask me if they can access Wordsmith and play with it for themselves," Kotecki said. "I'm really excited that soon they can."

According to a news release from Automated Insights, the Wordsmith interface for the general public is being released in a beta stage.

Use of Wordsmith Beta, as the new offering will be known, is not cheap,

but it will be cheaper than using Wordsmith in tandem with Automated Insights.

According to an Oct. 20 story by the Poynter Institute, using Wordsmith in concert with Automated Insights can cost anywhere from \$10,000 to \$50,000 per month, depending on the client's request.

Wordsmith Beta does not require input from staffers at Automated Insights and will reportedly be much cheaper, though a price has not yet been set.

The difference in price is due to some users using just the platform – Wordsmith Beta – and others using Wordsmith in tandem with Automated Insights to help disseminate data or develop story structures.

Wordsmith Beta users will be required to develop templates that dictate how data will be interpreted. A series of steps known as branches allow users to determine how variables in the data populate the story.

According to Poynter, the template reads like a mad lib. Blank spaces are filled by various data when the files are processed. The impression is that using Wordsmith is relatively straightforward for any journalist with a penchant for using data.

In the Oct. 20 release CEO Robbie Allen said most innovations in writing focus on the distribution of content as opposed its creation. The dearth of data should be an asset in the writing process, but the data goes largely unused.

What is lacking, Allen said, is a lack of integration between data and

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Patterson said the AP spent a period using Wordsmith in a beta mode. The program functioned, but stories did not post for wider dissemination until being examined for accuracy. Patterson said staff checked the writing and structure of the story and headlines.

The process also offered a chance to look at the accuracy of the algorithm. Consistent mistakes confined to certain parts of the story meant the information driving the algorithm likely needed adjusting.

"I didn't really anticipate the amount of work that was going to have to go into it from the AP side to make sure the stories turned out the way we wanted them to turn out," Patterson said. "We certainly wouldn't have been able to get it done had it not been for dozens of business staffers at AP participating in the process."

AP's error rate in stories, which Patterson said is very small, went down slightly once it started using Automated Insights. Patterson said Wordsmith is an excellent tool, but said robojournalism will not eliminate the need for journalists and newsroom staff.

A common argument in favor of robojournalism is it will free newsroom staff to focus on stories of greater significance. Negative arguments focus on the potential loss of newsroom positions in an industry already stressed by years of job cuts.

Robojournalism is going to continue to grow. As is true for all journalism, the initiative is driven by the human touch.

"I think it's a good tool for news organizations to consider when they have stories or information that's pretty straight or repetitive, and I think that because there are a lot of things like that, automation is here to stay," Patterson said. "It will never be able to replace the value of people and what they bring to covering a beat." ▲

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easy-to-use widely accessible writing tools.

"As a result, many data-driven insights are hidden in complex charts and graphs that require additional – and manual – narrative explanations," Allen said.

Automated Insights has been working on a platform to automate writing since 2007. In computer science terms, the process is to as natural language generation (NLG).

Wordsmith can take a story structure and a dataset and generate numerous pieces

of content that sound like a person wrote each one of them individually.

"In fact, we create more content in a week than all the large media companies combined create in a whole year," Allen said. "Last year alone, Wordsmith generated over one billion pieces of content with a team of just 50 employees."

Users can request access to Wordsmith Beta at automatedinsights.com, the web page of Automated Insights.

— Chris Bennett