



Generative AI: A creative sparring partner

Talpa Network and Talpa Studios are employing Generative AI to enhance various facets of the creative process

For Talpa Network (one of the Netherlands' leading media organizations) and its sister company Talpa Studios (a global content house for non-scripted formats) open mindedness is an article of faith. In that spirit, both companies are experimenting with generative AI (GenAI) to address all kinds of tactical challenges and opportunities: from creating images for quiz shows to writing scripts, and from creating subtitles to composing social media posts.

An entrepreneurial mindset is deeply ingrained within the DNA of both Talpa Network as well as Talpa Studios. *"This means no bureaucracy at all"*, says Joost Brakel, Managing Director AI & Innovation¹ at Talpa Network, which is *"in the case of GenAI, an advantage."* Rather than trying to create a grand overarching AI strategy, Brakel and Maarten Knops, his counterpart at Talpa Studios, focus on helping specialist staff explore how GenAI can make them both more effective and efficient. As a result, this powerful new technology is permeating both companies from the bottom up. *"This sells itself: it is so clear this adds value to any department,"* Brakel explains. *"We no longer encounter*

teams or departments where they have not yet experimented with AI at all."

When Knops, an arts school graduate, first started experimenting with GenAI, he was both astonished and alarmed. *"I thought to myself after all those years of training, everything I have learned can now simply be filled in with a text and you can create these beautiful things,"* he recalls. *"But yes, that same evening I was busy creating images until 4 in the morning. And in the week following, it felt as if I was six years old again and going to the cinema for the first time. It gave me the same goosebumps."*

For a media group, GenAI isn't an optional extra

Both Brakel and Knops quickly concluded that their companies had to embrace GenAI. *"You can no longer do without AI. It will help you to go faster and be more creative,"* notes Knops. *"But also, both our companies like to dream big, experiment and push boundaries. Therefore it's a no brainer to embrace AI, to see how it can transform the way we tell stories."*

The versatility of GenAI has been a real eye opener. *"When we started a year*

ago, we thought that the rise of generative AI would mainly affect the administrative functions," says Brakel, a former strategy consultant. *"Financial administration, monthly reports, planning and control, recruitment, vacancy texts, corporate web site communications, you name it. But we've now seen that it is also very creative, and can help discuss creative concepts, marketing campaigns, media briefings and so on."*

For quiz shows, for example, GenAI can make it quicker and cheaper to create visual questions. *"Normally you would buy a photo from Getty Images or Shutterstock, and I would pay an x amount for that. However, with Midjourney or other generative AI software you can make these types of images relatively easily,"* explains Knops. *"It saves costs and gives you a lot of freedom. That works really well in my opinion."*

Although production teams need to learn how to prompt a GenAI system to get the result they want, Knops says they quickly catch-on, aided by "prompt libraries" and reverse engineering of GenAI-created images. In the same vein, GenAI can help the production team to quickly compose

¹ Joost Brakel has recently become CEO of Talpa Network

sophisticated quiz questions, and scripts for the presenters. *“It used to be all written by hand and it is still checked by hand, but a first draft can be done using GenAI,”* adds Brakel. *“There are many examples where AI works. There are of course also examples where it doesn’t work, yet, such as AI-generated radio news bulletins.”*

For Talpa Studios, GenAI has already accelerated the design and build of studio sets for active game shows. For example, GenAI can quickly advise on how much force a 20 kg ball will generate when it rolls down a three-metre slope at a 20 degrees angle. In the past, the team would have tested these kinds of props in the studio prior to filming the show with contestants. *“Instead of calling people, you can have access to all kinds of expertise that you didn’t have before,”* says Knops.

Furthermore, elaborates Knops, GenAI is creating an opportunity to automate manual repetitive work like rewriting text for different target audiences or social media posts. It is supporting in the planning of social media campaigns and creating draft schedules for posts on various different platforms. *“It has really nice ideas and we can fine-tune it a bit if necessary, but it saves so much repetitive work,”* notes Knops.

At the same time, GenAI can help brainstorm new ideas and programme concepts. Although Knops says maybe half of the resulting output is not usable, GenAI works quickly and efficiently, making it the “perfect sparring partner” for creative employees. Brakel describes how GenAI could be used to create a new superhero, his or her sidekick and their vehicle, and then design a board game and other merchandise, in a matter of minutes.

AI has even progressed to a point where it can generate realistic digital doubles of actors and actresses that can be used to enact fight scenes or action sequences. Knops predicts the technology will also be used to scan real world spaces and then recreate them digitally. *“I think in*

ten to twenty years you will no longer look at a photo, but just step back into that space,” he speculates. *“It will be a digital photo book that you can really immerse yourself into and be in the moment again. For instance, see yourself as a young person or see your child taking its first steps again.”*

Keeping pace with a fast-changing market

With GenAI systems evolving so quickly, both Brakel and Knops need to closely follow market trends and keep their companies well informed. “We are overwhelmed with emails from all kinds of parties with demos, new programs, new tools,” says Brakel. “You also see it in podcasts on YouTube and on LinkedIn.”

Knops feels he needs to read everything. *“There is a real fear that you will miss out on something great,”* he says. At the same time, some new tools turn out to be disappointing. For example, GenAI systems that can produce compelling videos of animals tend to struggle to do the same with people.

While many GenAI systems are effectively in beta mode and don’t always deliver on what they promise, they tend to improve very quickly. *“This is the discussion we have all the time,”* Brakel says. *“Well, it’s nice, but it’s not perfect yet and it may take a while before it is perfect, but it is getting exponentially better.”* Brakel has taken it upon himself to show the rest of Talpa Network and Talpa Studios how fast GenAI systems can improve. To make this point, he created a (AI-assisted) video in which he snaps his fingers and immediately switches from speaking Dutch to Italian.

Rather than trying to develop a multi-year strategy, Brakel agreed with the rest of the management team to apply GenAI in “short sprints” of about three months.

Onboarding teams in GenAI

Brakel and Knops run internal training programmes for individual departments, which are designed to be a hands-on “crash course” in what AI can do. In these sessions, the trainees identify the routine challenges they face and the repetitive tasks they must do, and then test whether they can be offloaded to GenAI. *“AI is a bit like mathematics or playing the piano. You don’t learn it by watching the videos,”* explains Brakel. *“You learn it because you are doing it. Only then will you see what its power is.”*

At the same time, Knops encourages his colleagues to retain a critical eye and be aware of GenAI systems’ potential bias. *“Don’t take it for granted,”* he cautions. *“Be aware of what you put in and what comes out of it.”* As a high-profile company in the Netherlands, Talpa Network is well aware it is under a magnifying glass and can’t take risks with its reputation.

Turning the media world upside down

While acknowledging that GenAI has flaws, Brakel and Knops regard the technology as a game changer for the media sector. Knops describes the advent of GenAI as a once-in-a-lifetime technological revolution that will have an even bigger impact than the Internet or the mobile phone.

While GenAI promises to close the expertise gap between small companies and large companies, Knops says businesses will still need knowledge and experience to get the best out of the technology. *“I think that is where the strength lies for us as a company,”* he contends. *“We have the knowledge in-house and the possibilities are endless, so we can come up with completely new concepts.”* Although Knops believes GenAI will challenge many job roles and might make some obsolete, just as the invention of photography did, it will also create new types of jobs.

Brakel agrees that AI and human beings will work alongside each other in the media sector. *“It makes our work more fun, more creative,”* he says. *“We are faster with AI. But I think GenAI will remain in that co-pilot phase for the time being.”*

More broadly, the ultimate role of AI in the media sector is a question for society at large, as well as individual businesses. The rapid rise of GenAI has implications for copyright, privacy and the distribution of wealth, for example. *“There are some questions floating above the market that are bigger than Talpa Network and Talpa Studios, and to which we do not have the answer, but on which we ultimately need to have a position,”* Brakel concludes. *“The world does not yet know exactly which way this is going therefore we need to approach it curiously but also cautiously.”*

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