

Backhander to the adverbose

Warning. Warning. This may not be one of my columns. It could have been produced by something called “AI”, which stands for artificial intelligence, or given another name – a robot.

I’ve just read about a university lecturer who produced a credible essay by feeding a bunch of genuine ones into a computer with an AI programme. It would only have scored a C, he said, but it would have passed.

I can see how this will help me extend my column-writing career; just feed in the nearly 200 I’ve written in the past four years and have the robot write a new one.

Whether this will work only once is unclear, but perhaps by the time I need such a strategy, Mr or Ms AI or perhaps Siri will have improved to A-grade capability.

As it happens, this is a real column (I can’t imagine AI will ever develop a sense of irony or humour) inspired by New Plymouth Mayor Neil Holdom, who seems enamoured by the potential of AI, judging by an article he wrote for Taranaki Daily News last week.

He predicts AI will be a big help to our aging population. I’m not sure what he means, but it was important because it was the only reference he made to old(er) people in his vision for Taranaki.

I’m tempted to conclude he was referring to the Roomba 980, a robot vacuum cleaner that uses artificial intelligence to scan room size, identify obstacles and remember the most efficient routes for cleaning.

According to the manufacturer’s blurb, the self-deploying Roomba determines how much vacuuming there is to do based on a room's size, and it needs no human assistance to clean floors.

I’m uneasy about that word “self-deploying”. There are visions of a rogue Roomba emerging unbidden from the (b)room cupboard and pursuing an octogenarian around the house.

However, if that’s the kind of AI Holdom has in mind to make life a new paradise for us oldies then his prediction might be a good one. For instance, it could help the elderly remain in their vast, empty mansions for a lot longer than their families would prefer.

AI already intervenes in my life, I've realised. I play Scrabble against a robot every evening before tea while keeping an eye on Bradley Walsh. My iPad provides a robotic opponent to help me keep my word power semi-sharp.

I can even choose how smart the robot is. I go with one of the clever-dick ones, but not his/her smart-ass cousin. I get the version that keeps accidentally opening up triple-letter score opportunities so I can win 87 percent of the games, a useful strategy to fool myself into eternal happiness.

I doubt, though, this is the kind of AI the mayor had in mind for those of us with remnants of white hair and creaky knees. His vision statement didn't elaborate, so I guess those of us who pay rates on our ill-gotten mortgage-free homes - and also vote in local body elections - will just have to guess what his future holds for olds.

The once-aspirational idea called "age-friendly city", which caught the eye of New Plymouth district councillors in the distant past of two terms ago, seems to have withered on the vine of bureaucracy, safely buried from those still enamoured of its concept.

But it would be churlish to leave you with the idea I think Holdom's view of Taranaki's prospects is anything other than admirable. It's shiny, optimistic, if a little adverbous.

It used bright, PR language with occasional long words that looked impressive. It was the kind of discourse learned and polished by people who spend a good deal of their professional lives selling the positive face of large organisations.

I think its significance lay partially obscured by the fact it comes from the Taranaki official most likely to be approached first by those outside our realm who come here with ideas for development and wealth creation (their own).

From reading what Holdom thinks, we can be reassured those visitors are being met, appraised and possibly encouraged by someone young and open to lateral thinking, and able to assess the worth of proposals that might or might not be good for us.

Given the knocks sustained by Taranaki's economy recently, it's good to know our man at the top has been thinking deeply about what we face. I just hope he forgives my tendency to mock anything remotely pretentious.