British teenage whiz strikes deal with Yahoo

RAPHAEL SATTER - Associated Press - Associated Press

At 17, he's a tech whiz, he's rich — and he can even offer some advice on how to raise your kids.

Teenage programmer Nick D'Aloisio's decision to sell his news application Summly to Yahoo for what's rumored to be a massive payout has turned him into a media sensation. The sale caps a short but successful career at Apple Inc.'s vast app store, where hundreds of thousands of pieces of software compete for the attention of smartphone and tablet users.

In an interview with The Associated Press on Tuesday, D'Aloisio said his computer skills were self-taught, explaining that he started by mastering movie-making software before tackling programming languages.

He said his parents were "very enthusiastic and supportive." Asked what advice he'd give couples hoping to raise their own wunderkinds, he urged them to let their children explore their own paths — be it computer science or drama.

"If there's a natural curiosity, that'll lead to, eventually, some success," the teenager said.

Summly is one of several apps that D'Aloisio has designed. It uses complex algorithms to automatically condense online news content into attractive little blocks of text that are useful for the small screens of smartphones.

D'Aloisio said he was thrilled to be working for a "classic Internet company" — Yahoo! Inc. is older than he is — and he laughingly dismissed a reporter's suggestion that his friends might be jealous.

"All my friends have been very supportive," he said.

He noted that the publicity over Summly had been building for more than a year, meaning he and those close to him had had time to adjust to the outside attention.

As with its other recent acquisitions, Yahoo didn't disclose how much it is paying for Summly, although British newspapers suggested the deal's value at several million dollars. D'Aloisio had already received investment from several sources, including venture capitalist backer Li Ka-Shing.

Asked what he'll do with the payout, he responded with serious answers unbefitting of an adolescent. He said the money was being kept in a trust until he turns 18, and he didn't seem interested in talking about what he'd buy for himself for his next birthday.

"I'd like to keep it safe. Bank it .... If I was to do anything it'd be angel investing," said D'Aloisio, who is slim with dark brown hair and bears a passing resemblance to Josh Radnor, the actor who plays main character Ted in the TV sitcom "How I Met Your Mother."

The teen app expert said he was interested in automated technologies that could anticipate users' needs before they even reached for their smartphones — such as an app that downloads the day's news stories just before a user steps into a subway.

D'Aloisio said there were no copyright concerns about Summly, which works by running a statistical analysis of the text to guess which bits are the most relevant to cut the content down. Media companies such as New York-based News Corp. have collaborated on making their content more Summly-friendly, he said, arguing that shortening software would ultimately be a win-win for content providers.

"We're introducing their content to a new, younger demographic," he said. "You like the summary, you read the whole story; it increases publisher viewership."

The technology isn't foolproof: He said the app sometimes has trouble shortening long-form or highbrow pieces, but he noted that humans, too, have trouble summarizing sprawling stories.

The deal announced Monday is Yahoo's fifth small acquisition in the past five months. All have been part of CEO Marissa Mayer's effort to attract more engineers with expertise in building services for smartphones and tablet computers, an increasingly important area of technology that she believes the Internet company had been neglecting.

Although the Yahoo acquisition won't close until later this spring, D'Aloisio said the Summly App will no longer be available. Its technology will return in other Yahoo products.

D'Aloisio will work for Yahoo in its London office — in part so that he can complete his high school exams. Two other Summly workers will join Yahoo at its Sunnyvale, California, headquarters. He said he eventually wants to attend university, perhaps to study philosophy.

"I haven't decided yet," he said.

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