Appinions Inc. is a Manhattan-based social media startup that provides software services that let people see the web through the lens of peoples’ opinions. Behind the services is a natural language understanding platform, based on over a decade of research by Claire Cardie, Computer Science, and her students.

Cardie’s research group had been developing statistical machine learning methods to identify opinions and other subjective language in online text, such as news and magazine articles and radio and television broadcasts. Their techniques were designed not only to identify where opinions were mentioned, but also to characterize the opinions according to topic, opinion holder, and sentiment of the opinion (positive, negative, or neutral).

Cardie, cofounder and chief scientist at Appinions (originally named Jodange), is only the first of an unlikely succession of Cornell connections that helped to build the company.
In 2006, serial entrepreneur Larry Levy, Appinions’ cofounder and CEO, sold his latest tech company, the Semagix Group, to Warburg Pincus. He was looking for a new business venture in the technology area when he read about Cardie’s sentiment analysis research in the New York Times.

Levy contacted Cardie numerous times by phone and by email to discuss the research and determine its commercial viability, but Cardie wasn’t interested in commercialization. Levy persisted, and Cardie agreed to meet him in the Duffield Atrium for lunch one day in December 2006.

“Poor Larry,” smiles Cardie. “He drove from the city out to Ithaca on a very snowy day just for lunch. We had sandwiches from Mattins, and I told him all about fine-grained opinion analysis, the natural language processing techniques behind it, and why it wasn’t yet ready for commercialization.” Levy asked lots of questions and described his thoughts on the many ways that opinion analysis might be used in real-world applications.

“Larry asked great questions from the beginning and saw immediately how broadly important the technology could be,” she said. “I couldn’t help but get a bit excited.”

Levy and Cardie had more discussions in the following months. When one of Cardie’s former PhD students, David Pierce, decided to leave his principle research scientist position at General Dynamics in Buffalo to find work closer to his family in the New York City area, Levy and Cardie decided that the time was right to launch the company. In late spring of 2007, Pierce came on board as the company’s chief technology officer to lead the technology transfer efforts.

In subsequent years, Appinions drew on many Cornell resources. Appinions has hired Cornell computer science undergraduates as summer interns. One of the company’s full-time software engineers is a master of engineering student from Cardie’s classes. Appinions also received funding from the Johnson School’s Big Red Ventures in 2009.

Since then, Levy has been teaching guest lectures each semester in the entrepreneurship classes of David BenDaniel, Johnson Graduate School of Management, one of the faculty behind Big Red Ventures. Johnson School students have engaged in projects to identify emerging market trends in the social media area. One Johnson School student spent two months at the company to join its marketing effort. BenDaniel continues to provide advice and guidance to Levy during his visits to Cornell.

In the past year, Appinions expanded its services into the social networking space. It released its Influencer services to find and track those individuals who are most likely to influence a trend, idea, product, or brand. Cornellians were again important in this business development.

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The Influencer products rely on Appinions’ extensive database of opinions—drawn from blog posts, newsgroups, Twitter, Facebook, company reports, news articles, and radio and television broadcasts—to identify the key influencers creating content on specific topics, as well as the influencers attracting the most attention.

According to Levy, “The relationship between opinions, opinion holders, and topics is one of the key pillars of all our applications. By identifying peoples’ opinions and sentiments about key topics over time, we can offer an in-depth understanding about who is worth listening to and how best to correlate their opinions to outcomes over time.”

Appinions’ customers include major news organizations, like the Economist, and publishers, like Cengage, which use the Appinions’ opinion and influence platforms to provide readers with relevant and interesting online content from across the web or specific sources. Customers also include marketing companies like repriseMedia, with clients including American Airlines, Hyundai, Sharp, USPS, and Verizon, and in-house marketing departments of companies like Dell Computers, which use the platform to alert clients when media mentions occur and to determine how influential these opinions may be.

Appinions had already raised $3.6 million from private investors. In addition, Appinions announced in July 2012 that the company has secured $3 million in funding to “fuel its sales and marketing efforts.”

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