

A close-up, low-angle shot of a soccer player in black shorts and socks, captured mid-kick on a green artificial turf field. The player's right leg is extended forward, and a white and yellow soccer ball is in motion, blurred by the kick. A white line is visible on the grass in the foreground.

united robots |

Newsroom automation playbook series
Reimagining local sports

Doing more with less...

With 10 regional sports desks, by 2015, Mittmedia's local sports journalism had dead-ended into a struggle of disjointed coverage, high freelance costs and little effect on reader engagement. This is the story of how automation helped their sports editors turn the ship around.

Robots can generate huge volumes of content. They are fast, reliable and accurate. But they are robots. That – in a nutshell – is what newsroom automation is about. Publishers who get real benefits from automation use robots for the stories that can be automated, freeing up reporters to do the investigative, quality, human stories that underpin the journalistic brand. Or cover your top local teams 24/7. **Robots and humans, both, are focused where they have the most impact.** For news publishers, sports is hugely important to some readers and completely uninteresting to others. For many publishers, the resources needed to cover local sports do not correspond to the value this content brings to the wider readership – or to the news business. But there is a simple way to work smarter – cover more matches, enable journalists to write more engaging stories and include more voices from teams and fans.

Read on to find out how Mittmedia's sports team embraced newsroom automation.



> Sweden's largest local group

In the years leading up to 2019, **Mittmedia** was Sweden's largest local media group, covering almost half of the country geographically, through 28 news sites, some 20 print titles and two sports verticals; Bandy puls and Hockey puls. In 2019 the group was acquired by Bonnier News, who subsequently created Bonnier News Local, which also includes a dozen titles of newly acquired Hallmedia as well as large regional title HD Sydsvenskan in Malmö.

Towards a top achieving sports desk

Mittmedia's sports in 2015: Spread across a huge chunk of Sweden, the ten sports teams covered a few top league teams in their regions, but more often than not, national competitors won the battle for the sports audiences. Mittmedia also wrote about a lot of lower division sports, which either claimed a lot of its good sports reporters' time or generated significant costs for print freelancers (€500,000 in 2014). And there was no real collaboration between the ten sports desks. "We got to a point where Head of Sports Mattias Wallström and I realized we needed to have one way of doing sports, even if we worked in ten different places," says then sports editor, later Head of Sports Henning Johannesson (now United Robots Chief Product Officer). "And we needed to become digital-first."

What to do? From analysis of the top 1,000 stories...

The reimagining of Mittmedia's sports journalism started with a deep dive into how readers consumed the content. It showed: what readers engaged most with were stories about the top league teams, breaking news in sports, live streamed games and good stories (no matter what sport). Articles readers did **not really spend time on** included **all match texts (even top teams)**.



*Henning Johannesson, Mittmedia
Head of Sports 2017–2019*

> ...to a list of action points

Based on the result of the content consumption analysis, Mittmedia sport set up a number of actions and goals:

- > Become the #1 source of stories about the top teams, with dedicated reporters and at least one story per day.
- > Creation of breaking sports desk.
- > Identify sports stories that really matter to readers.
- > Focus on digital planning and digital story-telling
- > Setting up KPIs for the sports department, each location, each reporter. All sports reporters required to collaborate.
- > Weekly meetings to plan and follow-up.

And – deploying robots to write all the match reports...>

Reporters and robots working together

It was clear match reports were not particularly well read content. At the same time fans expect their local news title to provide match write-ups. Mittmedia decided to automate all match reporting. It was an instant success in terms of the journalism. "Instead of getting bad articles from freelancers, we got good robot written texts," says Henning Johannesson. "And it meant we could cover a lot more lower division games." Integrating the robot with the newsroom team was more of a challenge. "We told the journalists that the robot was their new colleague. And sure, there were some objections to that. But after a couple of months, my reporters realised that the automation actually was a help for them – relieving them of time consuming match reporting and giving them more time to do real journalism."

Where there's data, there can be text

Mittmedia use the Sports robot from United Robots. The texts delivered are generated through an NLG (Natural Language Generation) process applied to structured data sets from data supplier Eversport. In its first year of use at Mittmedia, the sports robot delivered more than 10,000 sports texts, increasing the number of local match texts by 25–50% across sites and season. Sports include football, ice hockey, bandy, basketball and handball and the data points behind the texts are: score, half time/period score, scorers, league table, streaks.



> Double engagement effect

By automating the match reports, Mittmedia succeeded in driving reader engagement in two different ways:

> By covering more lower division matches, in more sports, they reached **more teams, more players and more fans**. One effect was more engagement on social media, like the post left, where a division 3 women player who was mentioned in a headline, shared the news on Facebook.

> The automation **freed up reporter time to write more engaging stories**, that were read by more people, driving the pageviews / article editorial KPI.

Q&A: Coach comments via text message

In 2018, United Robots launched the Q&A function in its Sports robot: After each match, the robot sends match specific questions to team coaches (who have agreed to participate) via SMS. The comments are automatically inserted in the match report and add an important human voice to the automated articles. Small Mittmedia title Bärgslagsbladet / Arboga Tidning publish comments from top league basketball team Köping Star's coach as well as from a couple of ice hockey team coaches. "The challenge is to get the clubs to understand that readers really appreciate the sports robot, and that it's a win-win for the coach to take part and help make the match texts as good as possible. They gain exposure and happy fans, and we get good articles and happy readers," says Helena Tell, Bbl/AT Chief Editor.

From the start in 2018 to January 2020, a total of 602 coaches provided 6272 published match comments on behalf of 536 teams, 28% of which were women's teams – not just to Mittmedia but to most Swedish publishers who use the United Robots sports bot. In a 2020 survey, of the almost 200 coaches who responded, over 90% said the function enabling them to comment via text message after matches is either "good" or "very good."



> "Equivalent to reporter written job"

According to Helena Tell at Bbl/AT, the coach comments via text message really elevate the robot texts. "For a small local title like ours, with no dedicated sport reporters and limited staffing during evenings and weekends, the **coaches comment function is a huge asset**. We get match reports – immediately after the final whistle – which are comparable in quality to a story over phone by a reporter. The clubs and fans get the attention and the information they hunger for. The newsroom can instead spend our time chasing the the 'real' stories, in other words content which we know a broader set of readers interested in sports want to read."



Business effects: Reader rev & advertising

Importantly, the sports robot hasn't just alleviated the newsroom workload, it has also had measureable effects on journalism and business.

Digital subscriptions: In the first year after match report automation and reorganisation, sports became the engine for driving reader revenues. Sports contributed between 30–40% of all digital subscription sales, which were priced at €9/month. Mittmedia's sports journalism generated 10,000 new subscribers in that first year (total number of subscribers 1 Jan 2018: 50,500)

Pageviews: In 2019, robot articles generated in total over 7.3 mi logged-in pageviews at Mittmedia, which helps engagement and thus retention as well as the advertising business.



Robin Govik, Mittmedia Director of Development

> "Single biggest contributor to Plus"

According to Mittmedia **Director of Development Robin Govik**, sports has become a driver in attracting paying digital readers: "Sports has been the single biggest contributor to Plus conversions and engagement, no contest. Sports is key to our digital subscription success." Says **Andreas Karlström, Online Editor** for the Gästrikland region: "I daren't even imagine the impact it would have on us at the Gävle newsroom if Sports didn't contribute Plus conversions and page views. The interest in sports generally, and in our local hockey team Brynäs in particular, seems to be insatiable."

> So what can we learn from Mittmedia?

Mittmedia's 28 news sites are at the front line of local journalism. **It's a world of daily battles – prioritising how to use limited editorial resources while making sure all the important stories get done.** At Mittmedia, the sports robot is a valuable writer resource. Thanks to the matches it covers and the texts it writes, reporters can focus on the journalism that drive the Reader Value KPI and underpin the journalistic mission.

Some of the key automation learnings that Mittmedia sports department have made – and that other newsrooms can benefit from – include:

- > **Use robots for basic stuff.** Mittmedia have a dozen sports to cover, with weekly games in season. In terms of reporter time, that would be hours and hours by the pitch every week. Match reporting is the perfect job for a robot – with enough data points it can write quite rich texts, and for many of the local teams, the coaches provide comments too. Robots should take the pressure off journalists in terms of basic reporting, allowing them to focus on the really important stories.
- > **Use robots for speed.** Match reports are filed seconds after the final whistle. With a traffic robot, incidents are reported instantly. Many of the publishers United Robots work with put speed as a key value of the robot reporting.
- > **Use robots to do the stories that would otherwise not get done.** Without the robot, Mittmedia would not be able to cover all those sports in such detail. The robot texts allow the titles to provide sports journalism that include that many more teams, players and fans in the local communities.
- > **Use robots for consistency.** With the robot writing the match reports, the quality is guaranteed, and with automated text message interviews, there's always a comment from the coaches.
- > **Have a distribution strategy.** Strategic distribution (geo-targeting, personalisation, push notifications etc) is necessary to leverage the volume of texts automation can generate.
- > **Explain to your readers.** Be transparent – talk about why tech development and efficiency is important in local media and how automation helps your newsroom provide more and better coverage.



Bridging the buzz and the reality

A lot of people in the news industry are talking about newsroom automation. Relatively few have any actual experience. United Robots do. Our roots are in journalism. We've worked with publisher partners, including almost all news publishers in Sweden, since 2015. Publishers who are able to leverage automation to produce better journalism and make more money.

> You don't need to reinvent the wheel!

Getting an automation project off the ground may seem daunting, but it really doesn't have to be. We've done the legwork – we can help:

- > **Check out our robots – are any of these topics of interest to your readers?** We've got robots on topics like sports, home sales, company registrations and traffic – ready to go, off the shelf. Look at your readers' news consumption behaviour – where could automation fit in?
- > **Learn from Scandinavian best practices.** Publishers who have worked with automated content for multiple years have identified key success factors, and are happy to share their insights. We have the business and journalism cases to show the positive effects of newsroom automation.
- > **You'll have instant support.** One of our key USPs is our developer team, who work as an extension of the newsrooms and are there to provide immediate assistance when you need it.

Newsroom automation has the potential to boost publishing in many ways, for all types of journalism and business models.

We will help you take the first step.

Get in touch.

We look forward to talking with you.

Thomas Sundgren, CCO | thomas.sundgren@unitedrobots.ai | +46 70 624 2204

Henning Johannesson, CPO | henning.johannesson@unitedrobots.ai | +46 72 241 4136

Cecilia Campbell, CMO | cecilia.campbell@unitedrobots.ai | +46 70 88 00 384

