

united robots |



Newsroom automation playbook series

Supporting the tiny newsroom

When journalists are spread too thin...

Stretched newsroom resources. Constant editorial choices about what there's time to cover. And huge amounts of sports. This is the story of how robot written match reports allow Swedish Bbl/AT to free up reporter time and really focus on their *Reader Value* KPI.

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. **Robots and humans, both, are focused where they have the most impact.** Nowhere is maximising the impact of journalists work more critical than in small newsrooms, where every hour counts in the hard work to cover all the local stories readers expect. For one tiny newsroom in mid Sweden part of the solution has been to use robot written match reports, including comments from team coaches. **Read on to find out how Bäragslagsbladet/Arboga Tidning have embraced newsroom automation.**



The screenshot shows the top part of the bblat.se website. The header is blue with the logo 'bblat.se' and the tagline 'En del av MittMedia'. Below the header is a navigation bar with tabs for 'Start', 'Blåljus', 'Sport', 'Familj', and 'Opinion'. Underneath, there are links for 'Alla nyheter', 'Köping', 'Arboga', and 'Kungsör'. The main content area features a section titled 'Senaste nytt' with a blue arrow icon and a headline: '10:00 + Fler evenemang ställs in – här är en del av allt som inte blir av på grund av coronakrisen'.

> A typical small local publisher

Bäragslagsbladet/Arboga Tidning, Bbl/AT, cover the towns of Köping, Arboga and Kungsör west of Stockholm. The area, Västra Mälardalen, is home to some 50,000 people and some 3,000 companies, mainly SMEs.

Bbl/AT is part of Bonnier News Local (previously Mittmedia). It's led by **Editor-in-chief Helena Tell** and employs five further journalists. The Bbl/AT website gets 7,000+ daily uniques, generating some 48,000 pageviews. The three day print edition has a reach of 19,000.

Reporters & robots working together

The Bbl/AT newsroom has six staff; Chief editor Helena Tell and five further reporters. The reporters work daytime and each covers one in five weekends. There is no evening staffing. All journalists are expected to write all types of stories – including sports. The only thing they never write are match reports, that is the job of Bbl/AT's sports bot. The title also uses a robot for write-ups of local house sales. "When we first started using the robots, there was general resistance from the journalists," says Helena Tell. "Today that's changed, I think. The reporters see that the robots have improved and are doing a good job – and perhaps most importantly, that **the robots have removed the stressful task [of match reporting]** often done by young reporters late nights and weekends and with no supervision on site."

Where there's data, there can be text

Bbl/AT uses the Sports robot and the Real Estate robot from United Robots. The texts delivered are generated through an NLG (Natural Language Generation) process applied to structured data sets from data suppliers EverySport and the Swedish Land Registry respectively.

During 2019, the robots delivered 1,074 sports texts and 826 real estate texts, all published automatically on the Bbl/AT website and in its app.



> "We'd need two extra reporters"

"I estimate we'd need two additional reporters to do the work the robots do for us today. I'm not sure that's enough. The robot works day and night, it's not off sick or at home looking after ill children," says **Editor-in-chief Helena Tell**.

"For a small newsroom, automation is necessary. We're forever prioritising and sometimes I feel all we ever do is choose not to cover things. We know where to deploy our resources in order to make our readers happy. And if we can use technology and automation to perform tasks as well as we reporters would, there's no doubt that's what we should do."



Fast and bespoke local sports coverage

The Sports robot, in particular, has helped Bbl/AT meet the local demand for regular and comprehensive reporting. “Thanks to the sports robot we’re able to offer our readers fast and bespoke sports coverage on a very local level,” says Helena Tell. “The sports robot is outstanding at away games – something I, as a basketball fan, really notice. It delivers quick updates and meatier texts as more data comes in.”

Deploying the robot has thrown up a couple of issues – which at the same time are opportunities. “The first challenge is about getting readers to understand how they can follow their teams in a really great way through our app – we need to get better at explaining this.”

The second challenge relates to the clubs and the robot’s interviews with coaches. *next page* ➤



➤ From basketball to table tennis

Bbl/AT cover all matches in all of the main seven sports played locally on a regular basis. **Football** and **floorball** (a popular Swedish indoor version of hockey) are reported on from the top league matches through division 4. All top league matches are also covered in **basketball**, **bowling** and **table tennis**. In addition to this there’s coverage of **ice hockey** and **handball**.

Köping has a top league basketball team, **Köping Stars**. They are very popular with local fans, and their games are the only ones sometimes covered by a Bbl/AT (freelance) reporter. *(Köping Star top player Jeremy Combs – photo by chief editor Helena Tell)*

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. "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."

Even after Köping Stars home matches, covered by a reporter, the coach is interviewed by the robot. "Because basketball has become such a popular spectator sport in Köping we've put resources into having a freelance journalist cover the home matches. Despite this, the club has chosen to comment via the text robot, which we're grateful for. It means they have a routine for always providing comments, including for the important away games."

Of the clubs Bbl/AT cover, Köping Hockey and Arboga Hockey (ice hockey) coaches also comment via Q&A. Their matches, in the top and second leagues respectively, are covered exclusively by the Sports robot.



> "Equivalent to reporter written job"

According to Helena Tell, 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: towards *reader value* KPI

Importantly, the robots haven't just alleviated the newsroom workload, they have also had measureable effects on journalism and business.

Editorial KPI: "We have a KPI, Reader Value, which is set at 350 logged-in pageviews for an article. Generally, our sports articles struggle to reach that level. Sports is a divider; some love it, some hate it. Looking at Reader Value only, we'd not write a single text about sports, but of course we all know the mix is key. And sports lovers would be furious if they didn't get sports through their local paper. Thanks to the robot we can take a wider stance in our sports coverage, find angles that appeal to a wider group of readers. This means we hit our KPI and sports fans get the information they view as important, i.e. match reports at the final whistle blow."

Conversions: According to Helena Tell, a key business effect of the robot articles are conversions, both sports and house sales texts generate new paying subscribers – 12 in all in 2019.

Pageviews: In 2019, robot articles generated in total over 62,000 logged-in pageviews, which helps engagement and thus retention as well as the advertising business.



> "Think 'self-service check-out'"

When Bbl/AT first deployed the text robots, paying readers were outraged not to get "real" articles. "The reaction was tied to other unpopular changes at the paper, including the reduction in print editions from five days to three. "Since I took over as editor in autumn of 2019, I've participated in various community events to talk about the newspaper," says Helena Tell. "I normally spend some time on technology developments and our robots. People do understand the importance of tech developments in more efficiently providing quality content to our readers. I make the comparison with the self-service check-out in the supermarket, where the shop has alleviated staff of a heavy task, and provided customers with a faster check-out process. In the beginning, people resisted that change, but now many appreciate it."

> So what can we learn from Bbl/AT?

Bbl/AT Editor-in-chief Helena Tell is 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.** In Tell's newsroom, the sports robot and the real estate robot are valuable writer resources. Thanks to the topics they cover and the texts they write, the five reporters can focus on the journalism that drive the Reader Value KPI and underpin the journalistic mission.

Some of the key automation learnings that Bbl/AT have made – and that other newsrooms can benefit from – include:

- > **Use robots for basic stuff.** The Bbl/AT newsroom have seven sports to cover, including four divisions of football and floorball as well as a top league basketball team. In terms of reporter time, that would be 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 three 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 our publishers 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, Bbl/AT would not be able to cover all those seven sports in such detail. The robot texts allow the paper to provide sports journalism that include that many more teams, players and fans in the local community.
- > **Use robots for consistency.** Even though a reporter covers Köping Stars home games, the coach always sends in comments to the robot. Nothing gets missed.
- > **Have a distribution strategy.** Bbl/AT let readers follow their team in the app. 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.

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