

In the last video, we defined what a product is in journalism and the role of the product manager. I talked briefly about the various stakeholders involved in the creation and launch of a product and how the best products involve deep collaboration between them.

That collaboration is the heart of product thinking.

Defined, product thinking is aligning all of those parts of the organization, including editorial, technology and business together to produce more strategic outcomes.

When I say strategic outcomes, I mean answering questions like, “how is the journalism we’re producing really serving our audience?”, how is our membership program aligned with our business objectives or how are we maximizing our technology stack?

As journalists, it’s important to remember that we draw a firm line between business outcomes and editorial independence. It’s important that the journalism we produce is not influenced by advertisers or people in power. But that doesn’t mean that we can’t be concerned with the sustainability of our industry.

As journalists, our foremost responsibility is to inform and empower our readers. To do that, a product thinker in a newsroom needs to understand the newsroom culture in journalism and media ethics and figure out how to build products that serve readers while also maximizing resources and creating a sustainable business. We want products that are valuable for readers enough that they are willing to pay for them or can be sustained by advertisements that see the value of the work.

So, what does this look like in practice? Let’s look at the Wall Street Journal’s Talk2020 tool.

The tool began as an internal product for reporters and editors who worked in the Journal’s Washington bureau to search a database of thousands of transcripts to see what the presidential candidates have said about an issue.

While the tool was great for reporters and editors at the journal, a product thinking approach to the tool would be asking if that is something readers could benefit from as well.

To find that out, the journal conducted focus groups and found that readers wanted to be able to quickly locate quotes and facts about a candidate’s record.

The journal then went to work to transform the internal tool into a product useful for readers. You can read more about this tool in this week's readings.

This product is the perfect example of how to take what you have as a company and refine it in a way that also reaches user needs. And that is what product thinking is about.