

ISOJ 2020: Day 4

Product Management: How news organizations can become more audience-oriented, data-driven and product-focused

Chair: [Cindy Royal](#), professor and director of the Media Innovation Lab, Texas State University

- [Deb Adeogba](#), senior media experience manager, Microsoft News
 - [Millie Tran](#), chief product officer, The Texas Tribune
 - [Aron Pilhofer](#), James B. Steele Chair in Journalism Innovation, Temple University, and director, News Catalyst
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Mallory Tenore Hi, everyone, and welcome to the last panel of the day today. I'm Mallory Ternore, associate director of the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas. And I'm very excited to have you here for this panel on product management.

Now, before we get started, I just want to share a few housekeeping notes with you. And first, I want to remind you that this panel will be interpreted into Spanish. So if you'd like to tune in via Spanish, just go to the little globe at the bottom of your screen and click the Spanish channel. And from there you'll be able to listen to it in Spanish. I also want to remind everyone that we are going to be streaming this panel onto YouTube, and so we'll be streaming it in both English and Spanish. And we'll have the links to those YouTube channels in the chat feature in Zoom. So if you have any technical issues with Zoom at all, just tune in on YouTube. And then lastly, I want to encourage you to also use the hashtag #ISOJ2020 to share social media highlights from this panel. And you can also include your questions in the chat feature in Zoom, and we encourage you to ask questions. We're going to be having a Q&A at the end and we'll do our best to get to as many questions as we can.

So now I would like to introduce our next panel, which is titled Product Management: How News Organizations Can Become More Audience Oriented, Data Driven and Product Focused. So we're really excited about this panel. It's going to be awesome, and now I'm excited to turn it over to our moderator and longtime ISOJ-er, Cindy Royal.

Cindy Royal Thank you for having me as part of this 21st year of ISOJ, and hello to all of my friends out there in ISOJ land. We definitely missed you at the annual gathering of this in Austin in the spring. But thank you so much, Rosental, and Mallary, and the entire team, for making this happen virtually.

I'm Cindy Royal, and I'm a professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Texas State University, which is just south of Austin. And I'm the director of Media Innovation Lab. I'm looking forward to this panel to talk about some of the insights on the topic of product management, how news organizations can become more audience oriented, data driven and product focused.

So in 2017, I presented a research project called "Managing Digital Products in a Newsroom Context" at ISOJ. And at that time, I interviewed really a handful of people,

maybe a dozen people, that were in product or product-related roles in a range of media organizations. And I really wanted to understand what kind of products they work with, what their roles were, how the roles sit in their organizations, and what skills they needed to do that. One of the respondents in that study said this comment, "We used to know what a media product was. It was a newspaper or a television broadcast. Now it's much broader." And so you can see, I've surrounded that quote with the variety of products that are now available to disseminate journalism. It could be the website. A product could be the content management system that runs the website. There are all sorts of apps and special project websites, social media strategy, podcasts, newsletters, chat bots, and even editorial products that integrate interactivity and that are data driven that really require a product focus.

So it's a much more technological environment that requires new skills and competencies. And so at this point, it's important to update where we are in product three years later. This graph is often used to represent product management as the intersection of technology, business and the user. It's really the function that collaborates across the organization to understand the user's problems and create products to help solve them, but also be aligned with the organization's mission. So it's a function that is evident in many industries, particularly for digital products, when we talk about the technology and software development industries. But how this works in a media organization presents unique opportunities and challenges that we will address today.

I'm often asked when I show this slide, where's the journalism in this model? And it's the whole thing. It's really a new ecosystem of how we can see the mission of a media organization, and it gives us an opportunity to think about where that lands in our organizations.

One of the ways that I have conceptualized the role of product is to look at it as journalism in product versus journalism as product. From a very practical perspective, traditional journalism and emerging media content will reside on numerous platforms, and they're just nuances of how those processes are managed. But we can also conceptualize journalism as product in that we want to take a look at how the organization conceptualizes, conceives of, new products with users in mind. And then this begs the question of where in the organization should this be situated? Is this a business function, a revenue function, a marketing function? Should it reside in the technology area? Is this a new role? Is there a role for it in the news or editorial function, or is this something completely new that the organization needs to think about? Is it central to the operation of a media organization? And it is one of the topics that was presented in an article that is currently on Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, and it's free through July 29. So it's available for you to download. It's an invited forum on product management, and journalism and academia, and a group of scholars and professionals discussed these topics. Basically how we should be conceptualizing journalism with product management in mind as it relates to both the profession and to the academic environment.

So, of course, these challenges and changes are important to me in terms of how they drive curriculum change around product. And at Texas State, we have two product focused initiatives. One is a brand new degree in digital media innovation that is a STEM-based degree in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication. And since we started it in August of 2016, we have grown to 340 enrolled students in it this last year. And we've had more than 150 graduate with the degree, so they're well on their way to product-based careers. The second initiative that we need to have if we want to grow this beyond one program in central Texas and have people who can teach in a program like this, I

developed a project called the PhDigital Boot Camp with the help of the Knight Foundation. And it's a program where we recruited PhD students and early career faculty, and the program was 10 weeks of online modules leading up to a week at Texas State in the summer time for them to practice some of the skills hands on. And of course, this year that was completely virtual and completely hands on. But we have had more than 60 fellows now go through that program. And so they're ready to take roles on faculties, sit on personnel and curriculum committees, and hopefully start influencing curriculum to have more of these topics across the country.

So before we get started on the panel itself, I just want to cover some of the issues that I hope that our guests, our esteemed panel, will be able to discuss today. In addition to talking about the approaches that can be used in education that are very important to me, I think we can address the unique position of product in journalism, how that differs from other industries, the skills and competencies needed to develop a product culture in an organization, some of the tensions associated with product-focused news organizations, and then the ethics and the journalism sensibilities that we need to understand in how they are built into digital products. And then we'll be able to take questions from the panelists as well as the audience.

We have a stellar group of professionals today that are going to be talking with us about these issues. And our first is Deb Adeogba, and she is a senior media experience manager at Microsoft News Labs. And she comes to Microsoft after a career in broadcast journalism. Thank you for joining us, Deb.

Deb Adeogba Thank you. I appreciate it. My name is Deb. I work at Microsoft News now. But before that I was in broadcast TV news for 20-plus years on the technical side, so I did everything from prompter, to director, to technical director, audio operator. I just worked my way all the way through TV news up until about five years ago. I joined as the director of technology at a CBS affiliate in Seattle. And from there, I moved to Microsoft about two years ago. So more things about me. I was honored by TVNewsCheck at NAB with the Woman to Watch in Technology Award for my work in Voice a couple of years ago. I have two beautiful children, a 15-year-old boy and a 10-year-old girl that keep me busy. I also have an amateur radio license because I'm a real nerd. So if you are interested in talking to me on the ham radio, there's my license right there. And also, I'm an avid gamer. I'm an Xbox gamer. I play every night, so my gamertag is TheLadyBrain. So if you want to add me, I'll play with you.

So what do I do now? Now I work at Microsoft News. So for those of you who don't know what Microsoft News is, Microsoft News is a publishing platform that we deliver news to the world's most popular and trusted publishers across a variety of web and mobile experiences for Microsoft, as well as a growing number of syndication partners. We have nearly a half-a-billion monthly users, and our service reaches one of the largest audiences of news readers in the world. So we publish content for more than 4,500 publications across 140 countries and in 28 languages. My specific job for Microsoft News is Microsoft News Lab. So our mission at Microsoft News Labs is to collaborate with publishers to design and engineer solutions to advance the art, science and business of journalism. So what does that mean? Right. So some of the things that we try to do is speed and scale the journalistic process, engage new audiences, build deeper audience connections and help create compelling content.

One of the things that we were asked to address in this panel is how is product positioned and structured in your workplace? And this is a quote from Satya that I really like. It says,

"You join here not to be cool, but to make others cool." And that really defines our product disposition at Microsoft and ladders up to our mission statement, which is to empower every person and organization on the planet to achieve more. And that totally acts as a North Star in everything we do, every product choice we make, how we show up with customers. When we talk about empowering people, we simply mean that with the right tools, anyone, anywhere in the world can become anything they want to be.

So that being said, the background and where I work for now. I just wanted to show you guys a couple of products that the Microsoft News Labs's team has done. One of the projects that we just did was with the BBC. And this is an example of a partnership where we were approached with an idea, and we helped them make it a reality. And at Microsoft News Labs, whenever we create product, we use a simple equation. So it's problem, plus partner, equals product. And we try to follow that equation and then expand out from it.

So what was the process? We met the BBC about two years ago at GEN Summit, if you guys are familiar with that, and we began a discussion about how the BBC could use voice to deliver to a broader audience in new and engaging ways. Through many, many, many ideation and development meetings, we were able to decide on an MVP that satisfied the BBC's requirements for a robust speech recognition system, and tailor it for different languages and accents.

So if you're a product manager, if you create products, you know, there's always challenges. So I wanted to share some of the challenges with you that you might come across. So besides working between time zones and countries, we had to bring together different teams across different companies, which included engineering, business development, legal, comms, marketing, several other types of teams. And what started out as a meeting between four people, ended up being a project that spanned about 100 people. And as you can imagine, keeping all the people in the project up to date, on task, and headed in the same direction is quite challenging. The other challenge that we had is that BBC is funded by the government through TV license fees, so there were many people who needed to be part of the decision making, which can slow down a project a little bit. But also can speed it up just depending on what you're trying to get approved.

So in the end, we came out with Beeb. So Beeb has been released in beta. It allows Windows insiders in the U.K. to test the software on Windows. The BBC was able to see the true value of voice to reach their previously underserved audiences and also stay ahead of the content discovery innovation race, which is a huge race going on right now in journalism. This is an example of News Lab's identifying a common problem within the journalism industry and creating a solution for that industry.

So at News Labs, we travel around the world visiting different news organizations, and we kept hearing the same sentiment that news organizations had. They had large amounts of unstructured archival data that they had no insights on. And so we started thinking about it. We wrote an original text spec for Ida and then created a consortium of news partners that helped us shape out Ida into something that could be used universally out of the box for news organizations. However, what we did is we left 20% open because we know that every newsroom is different. Every newsroom has a different workflow. Every newsroom has different content. And we want to leave that 20% open, so every newsroom could shape it into what they needed for their newsroom.

In the process, we partnered with The Atlantic, who was part of the consortium, and we worked with them. They had over 150 years of rich archives. We sat down with them, and

we determined that we needed to get their archives into our Azure Cloud, and then customize an ingestion pipeline in Ida that would use search, object vision, OCR to extract text, images and key entities for indexing.

Some of the challenges that we came across with The Atlantic. The first one was a pretty common challenge when you're doing product. Time versus money versus expectations. We were running on a tight deadline, so we had to weigh our expectations with time and consider the cost as well. Another challenge we came across was formatting. So as you can imagine, we needed to be able to follow the different formats of The Atlantic over 150 years, and the formats changed drastically over 150 years. But we were able to produce an article segmented AI model to read the layout of issues from different time periods. And in the end we were able to help the Atlantic increase the value of their archives and allow them a more sophisticated query.

And also, if you guys want to know more about Ida, you can visit aka.ms/Ida, and it tells the entire Atlantic story. You can download white papers on Ida and even sign up for the sandbox yourself because we made it for you guys, made it for journalists. And we want you guys to check it out.

So the final thing we were asked to address on our presentation in the panel was the future product or challenges that need to be addressed. And so I think in my career, almost every TV station I worked at I was part of innovation. I was part of the people who innovated product or started some innovation, because I think it's really important for the survival of news organizations. And so in a perfect world, you would commit time, people and money, right? You would have a whole innovation group and R&D group that you would set aside, and they would have money, and time, and people. And you'd be able to innovate, which leads to product. However, that's not always possible. But what you can do is something that Microsoft does. Every year Microsoft has a hackathon, and the hackathon isn't just for engineers and developers, it's for everybody. So everybody can join the hackathon. Everybody can create products. They can put in their ideas. And I think it's really not only great for morale, but out of it comes some of the best product ideas. And I think it's important to include everyone in your organization in coming up with and designing products because having a diverse opinion of what you're creating can only make your product better. And for my News Labs teammates, they know I preach this because I always say any product that we did that was extremely successful is because all of us had our hands in it. It's just so important to have a wide variety of understanding, of ideas, of background, to be able to make something that's truly made for everyone. So thank you, guys. I appreciate it.

Cindy Royal Thank you, Deb. I appreciate it. That was a great presentation. Our next presenter is Millie Tran, and Millie is recently appointed as the chief product officer at the Texas Tribune. And she comes to the Texas Tribune after a career in innovation at both New York Times and BuzzFeed. So welcome, Millie.

Millie Tran Hi, thanks for having me. I love to see how product has evolved since your last project, Cindy. To share a little bit more about me, I work at the intersection of journalism, strategy, technology, and you can kind of throw in any other nouns there. I'm currently, as you mentioned, the chief product officer at the Texas Tribune. I was planning my move right as everything shut down in New York, so I'm eager to actually make it to Texas eventually. So I've worked in news and media my entire career, and a variety of roles in organizations. You mentioned New York Times and BuzzFeed. I was most recently at The New York Times, where I was deputy editor of the all platform team, which meant I led a

team of social editors around the world to curate and adapt the Times across platforms like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Apple News and beyond. And before that, I was the first ever global growth editor working with a cross-functional team of data analysts for audience researchers, folks in consumer revenue and marketing, and, of course, the newsroom. And I was just as previously director of global adaptation at BuzzFeed. And then before that, I was a founding member of the team that launched the BuzzFeed News app. So a lot of made up titles in there.

And I share that to kind of a kind of tee up how I think about product now, which is kind of all of that. So what I do as chief product officer, spoiler, it's not what you think. Cindy, you alluded to the unique position of product in journalism, and I think about that a lot. Chief product officer can sound like a totally abstract thing in a newsroom, and I think that's because product has traditionally used like tech principles. But product design, thinking about it as a newsroom must be different. Right. Because the news is the product, and that's kind of the through line in what I'll be talking about.

So I can't really talk about what I do without talking about my partner in all of this, who is Stacy-Marie Ishmael, who is the editorial director of the Texas Tribune. She started about two weeks before me. I mean, like a month. What is time? She started a little bit before me, and we worked together at BuzzFeed to launch the news app. So she's a dear friend. I think we just did this panel a couple of days ago with Neil Chase at CalMatters, and he said something about like how we finish each other's sentences. And I think that's just reflective of how we work. Like news is the product. We kind of are interchangeable. We joke a lot about how the engineering team doesn't know whether she'll jump in with qa requests, or I'll jump in with her editors on the story idea. And I remember my interview with the Texas Tribune and talking with the newsroom, and they keep talking about product thinking, like bringing product thinking into the newsroom. And, you know, I try to simplify to kind of the most essential. Right. And I think the title of my presentation is Making Things for People, and I think that that's such a clear way to think about product in the newsroom for me. Right. It's because you have people, you make things for them and then you deliver it to them. And that kind of encapsulates the whole system and infrastructure of how this all works.

What I actually do as chief product officer is I lead the audience, engineering, data, design, marketing and comms, and loyalty team. So we create journalism for our readers, viewers and listeners. Product then is kind of made up of all these different pieces. Right. How you might discover that journalism, experience that journalism, return to that journalism, become a member to support that journalism. And that's kind of one of the joys of this role, and why it was so exciting to me is because Stacy and I basically have purview over that whole process. So it gives us a lot of latitude to adjust, learn and kind of break down the silos because there are no silos between us and the work we do.

I have a gift here because what that actually looks like in practice is just balancing a bunch of different things all the time. And it's hard, but I think having a partner and having someone you trust and can collaborate with on all of this makes it a lot easier. I think it was Jennifer Preston who said she'll know that product is successful when, like, the top editor of a thing is also its top product person. Right. So I think that that's kind of my vision and where I expect our industry to go. Because the news is the product. The news is the product. The news is the product.

And just how we think about products at the Tribune, I mentioned this, I alluded to it before, it's everything from like the ideas and planning of the news, how we tell the news,

how someone experiences the news, and finds the news, and what we can learn from the news. Right. And I think if you took each one of those parts, they kind of breakdown nicely into the teams that Stacy and I oversee. So it's the ideas and planning from the newsroom whether that story ideas, brainstorming, throwing around headlines and all of that. And how we tell, and report, and make the news that touches on our internal tools. We have our own CMS at the Tribune and an amazing engineering team that kind of adapts that CMS to our needs. And then how someone experiences the news. We workshop headlines. We think about user experience, and design, and how someone might find that. That touches your audience team, that touches our marketing and comms team, and then what we can learn from all of that thereafter. Right? That's data. That's loyalty. That's product. It's everything.

So it's the whole system. Right. I have three little bubbles here. It's the journalism, product, and then people. Right. Because who are we making these things for? But as I said, back to where we started, it's actually making things for people, and it's actually just one circle. There's no diagram because it's just the news, and the news is the product. And so let me just give some concrete examples of how we've kind of lived that philosophy. And how many months has it been? I started at the end of March. So April, May, June, so like three-ish months. So in three-ish months, we launched the Coronavirus in Texas newsletter. We found some code that we had used in our election coverage, and put a nav bar that was dynamic, curatable, and especially, or most importantly, visible on mobile. Because we realize there are certain functions that had only shown up on the home page.

So this was such a great example of our engineering team connecting with our data visual team, and then using a problem that we had to identify from kind of a user-newsroom perspective, which is how do I help people guide or navigate through all of our coverage right now? Right. This was like the height of coronavirus in April, where there was so much news. We were doing kind of live blogs every day. And so we launched that quickly, and that was like really responsive to user need depth that I loved what you said about like a problem. What was it? Problem, people, then product? So that that was such a good example of that.

Apple news we launched that quickly. That allowed us to reach a bigger audience. It allowed us to move people through kind of our product suite.

And Stacy and I have been working on reordering the newsroom around the coronavirus. Do we have the right people in place to do X, Y, Z lines of coverage for us to reach X, Y, Z, audience goals, to reach media partners, whatever it is. The feedback loop there is our daily morning audience update. Where we use it as a time to take a really rigorous look back at the day before or at the weekend, and see what we. Did we jump on the story? What can we learn from something we did or didn't do that might inform what we do tomorrow or down the line? Right. It helps us hone our editorial judgment, listen more intentionally, and just really have a rigorous way to challenge ourselves, and make sure we're listening to our audience, and always be learning about what we're doing.

And then I think to just wrap this up, the biggest challenge will be money, time. How to afford what we want to do, right? With all these things it's what are the opportunity costs and resources required for whatever goal. Right. So we're thinking about the ORI of everything we do, especially now where there are a million things we can do. And I think the trick in all of this is aligning all of those different stakeholders, whether that's the business, the editorial goals, the tech goals, whatever it is. Thank you so much.

Cindy Royal Thank you, Millie, and congrats on the new position, and we're definitely looking forward to you finally getting down here to Austin.

Our next presenter is Aron Pilhofer, and he is the James B. Steele chair in Journalism Innovation at Temple University and the director of News Catalyst. He has a long career in digital leadership that includes The Guardian and The New York Times. So take it away, Aron.

Aron Pilhofer Thanks. I wish I was in Austin. I love this conference, and I'm really sad that we can't be together for it. It's one of my absolute highlights of the year, and I'm glad we're at least doing it this way.

As Cindy said, I'm currently a professor at Temple and running a project called News Catalyst, but I've actually been doing product for about a decade. And I say about a decade because a big chunk of that time I was doing product, and didn't even know it. I created a team in the newsroom at The New York Times that ultimately was a product team. It was a product and tech team. We built stuff on the internet, and that's really the first time I sort of started thinking about, "Wait a minute. Why is this happening here in the newsroom in The New York Times when we have this incredibly well staffed, brilliant product team outside the New York Times newsroom, and there's so little interaction between the two?" So that's a little foreshadowing.

Millie mentioned silos, and that's kind of what the News Catalyst project is about, in part. So as I said, I'm directing a project called News Catalyst. We're relatively new. We're funded by, among others, Knight Foundation, Lenfest Institute, Facebook and Google. We're housed at Temple University. The team is small. It's five of us. There they are.

And what do we do? So we focus pretty much on three key areas. One is sort of tools and technology. Like what are the tools that are available to local news organizations? How do we help them find the right tools to solve the problems that they have? The second one is collaboration and partnerships, in which in broadly that's kind of focused on product. We work at both the micro and a macro level. So we're doing projects now that we'll make public that we hope many news organizations can benefit from. But we're also doing partnerships at a very, very, very, almost one on one with a number of news organizations, hoping to learn. And I'll talk a little bit about that in a second. And then learning and expertise, which broadly falls into a couple of different categories.

But our overall theory of change here is pretty straightforward. And it's pretty much this. That by helping news organizations become more product focused, or become product focused, period, these news organizations will be able to better help themselves become sustainable digital businesses. Now, that's a pretty highfalutin goal, but we really have some highfalutin problems to solve right about now.

And the key here is for us to be putting resources in place where they can have the biggest impact. So Cindy earlier asked a sort of rhetorical question. Where should products sit? Should it be outside the newsroom? Inside the newsroom? Is it revenue? Is it technology? Is it marketing? Is it editorial? And the answer to that question is yes. The answer to that question is it's all of the above. It has to involve all of the above. The problem, and Millie mentioned silos, is that news organizations fundamentally, particularly legacy ones, but not just limited to legacy ones, are incredibly siloed. The New York Times, when I got there in 2005, was fundamentally structured around a product. Not a suite of products, but a product. And that was a daily dead tree edition that would land on

your front step every morning. Even The Guardian, which sort of surprised me. When I got to The Guardian, I was shocked at how siloed the organization still was, much less than the Times, but still was.

Product as a team, and a discipline, is one of those areas that actually cuts across, one of the very few, that actually cuts across all of those silos. Product teams are not empowered in the way they should be in news organizations, and that's something that we're trying to address. But that's why we are focusing so much on product, both as a profession, but also as a discipline.

And really what product does, the discipline itself, is it provides a structured means of problem solving. That's pretty much, at the end of the day, the discipline of product, that's what it is. It's a strategy to solve problems systematically, and to define strategic goals, and incrementally apply tactics to reach those strategic goals. That's what it is. It's not magic. And boy, we have some problems to solve right about now.

In tools and technology, some of the things that we're trying to do is to help news organizations align the strategies that they have in place with the right tools, the right approach, the right technologies. And this is surprisingly, incredibly hard. There is very little information out there to help news organizations make those decisions.

So an example of how we did that, we worked with Poynter and the Knight Foundation recently. The Knight Foundation had a grant program to help news organizations buy a new content management system if they felt like they needed to replace their old one, and provided a certain subsidy for that. The problem is, is how do you make that decision? You had to as an applicant, you had to say we want whatever. We want this CMS, or that CMS. How do you make that decision? What are the strategies? There's no Wirecutter for news out there, unfortunately. So that's kind of what we're trying to do is develop a sort of Wirecutter for news.

We're seeing examples of that. The Public Media Stack, for example, is a good start in that direction. But we are going to be launching some things over the next year or so that we think will be more helpful in other areas as well. CRMs, email and so forth. So that's sort of the tools and technology piece.

Some of the projects that we're building. We're actually developing software. We're aligned with Table Stakes. We're part of the Table Stakes program. And if you're not familiar with Table Stakes, that's beyond the scope of this. But I would suggest you should definitely get familiar with it. It's probably the largest scale, most impactful culture change program that journalism has seen in at least since I've been involved in it. It has worked wonders. News Catalyst fits in after Table Stakes, after a newsroom has said, "OK, we have these strategic goals. How do we find the right ways to achieve them?".

There's one project I wish I could talk to you about right now. Oh, my God. I wish I could talk to you about it right now. It is so exciting. But I'll say this. We're not just focused on traditional news organizations, on existing organizations. We also have a big chunk of work that we're doing around startups and trying to build a news ecosystem from the ground up, particularly in communities of need, which right now there is very little out there to help news organizations get started in communities of need.

We're all about collaboration and partnerships. Everything we do to this point and thereafter is collaborative and partnership. One of the projects we're working on right now,

for example, involves partners who are trying to develop a product to retain some of their long-time members. It's a difficult problem to solve. But through collaboration with us and with others, we're going to try to develop some strategies that they can use. So that's just an example of how we do collaboration and partnership. Everything we do is open. Everything we do is going to be done with partners, and everything we do is going to be done collaboratively.

And finally in the area of learning and expertise, this is an area that I'm particularly, I mean I'm passionate about all of this, but learning and expertise I think is one area where we really, really can make an impact.

There isn't right now. Well, there wasn't, a news-focused product training program. There are bits and pieces here and there. There are conferences. There are panels like this. There are little bits and pieces out there. But there wasn't anything that kind of brought it all together in a way that could take somebody from zero to the point where they could actually operationalize the knowledge that they're gaining. And so with the Newmark's school and Google, we developed a product immersion training program for small newsrooms, which we launched in the winter and spring. And yes, I'll get to that in a moment. It was a small group. It was 25. The initial cohort was just 25. But it was incredibly diverse group in every respect, both geographically also. We had U.S., Europe, Latin America and even a participant from Australia. It was an eight-week program, and it really was a deep dive in products. Stacy-Marie was one of our speakers actually. She was one of our trainers. Where we led the students from literally zero. There's a boot camp at the beginning, through eight weeks to the end where we were going to sort of set them free to start sort of using their skills internally.

Well, then we had a global pandemic. And guess what happened? Every organization started launching products. They all started launching newsletters. They started launching COVID-related things. And we thought, "Oh, this is going to be an incredible disruption for the training." But actually the opposite happened. What we heard back from them was the training actually is what helped them focus and help them develop products that they knew or could tell were actually solving problems that real people were having. And that's key for us.

So we're well, I can't even talk about that. So I'll just leave it at that. We're hopeful that we are going to be both doing this training again and expanding it significantly in the next year. So keep an eye open for that.

Some of the other projects. I mentioned partnerships already. I mentioned the immersion training program. We have another very exciting watch this space project that I can't talk too much about, but I will talk a little bit about. And obviously, one of the founding partners in launching SRCCON products last year, which was the first and as far as I know, the only conference dedicated to buy foreign about news and product. Out of SourceCon, we and some others gathered a group of product thinkers and started talking about, "Well, what might an organization look like that is focused on product and news, a global organization? And what might that organization do?" And all I can say is keep an eye open in the next couple of months because you'll see some exciting announcements coming out.

And so that, in kind of a nutshell, is what News Catalyst is, and what we do. And we'd love to talk to any of you about partnering. And, yeah, I'm looking forward to questions.

Cindy Royal Thank you, Aron, and you've definitely got a lot of exciting initiatives going on that I want to learn more about. And as you know, the research that you let me do with your interactive news team in 2009, the research I invited myself to do with your team, was really the beginning of my thinking about this. And so we've been kind of on this path together for 11 years, and I'm really excited to be able to continue this discussion and see where things are going. OK, thank you, everyone, for this. I think you've done a really good job to set up the discussion ahead.

Hi, everyone. While everybody sort of time travels back to the present here, I will set up a little bit about what we're going to be talking about today. First of all, I'm just thrilled to be here with all of you and having been asked to moderate this discussion at yet another ISOJ. I've been a part of it since it started when I was but a mere PhD student at the University of Texas, and I just love being a part of it every year. And what a fantastic week it has been. I'm just blown away by the content that we've seen so far, and it's not over yet. Thanks to all of you who are sticking in with us for this session. And please send in your questions through the chat or through YouTube, and we'll try to get to as many of those as possible.

Listening to these presentations, I was pleased with the amount of consistency that we had, and we did not plan this. We had some basic ideas about what we wanted each person to cover. But one thing I noticed from all the presentations was the emphasis on the human element. And quite often when I talk about product, it gets kind of a bad rap. People feel like it's sort of business, or icky, or distasteful. But when you hear about it described the way that Millie did in terms of making products for people, or when Deb talks about making others cool or empowering people, or when Aron talks about solving problems, then we're really witnessing the evolution of product.

So another thing that was clear from all these presentations is that product is becoming more central to the mission of a media organization. It's not just that you can hire a few people and call them product managers, or change a couple of titles of editors to become product managers. We're not even necessarily just talking about the role of product manager, although that is a progression that has occurred. We're really talking about a product culture that adapts the mission of a media organization.

And so I want to start, and maybe, Millie, you can address this first because you started talking about some of the challenges associated with building a product culture. You've been at several different organizations and now at Texas Tribune. They're all really different organizations. What are some of the challenges, and then what suggestions do you have for starting?

Millie Tran You know, it's funny, I have never been in what you would think of as a traditional product world. I've never had product manager in my title, but I've made a lot of things for people. I'm thinking back to you know anything from the Council on Foreign Relations, where we were making podcast, to the American Press Institute, where I was writing a newsletter, and really building the newsletter and building that audience. Or at BuzzFeed when we actually built the BuzzFeed News app, and the corresponding BuzzFeed newsletter. So, you know, I think one of the challenges is when, like you said, we can get a little distracted by the title and the definitions. But I really believe in making this more accessible and, you know, connecting what people are already doing to what product is, or how we think about products. Right.

So I think one of the ways you can get over that is talking about how the things you might already be doing are, in fact, product things. And kind of connecting the ideas of, you know, what is product, but like shipping things right and making things. So if it's about defining what that is, doing the user research to understand that need, figuring out how to make the thing and what teams and resources that requires to actually putting it out into the world and iterating on it. Right. Like I'm sure so many of us have done that process, but not maybe have thought about it as a product.

Cindy Royal How about you, Aron. When we talk about challenges to product culture, how has that happened in the organizations that you've been in, as well as the ones that you're helping now, the local journalism startups or the local journalism organizations, rather?

Aron Pilhofer So the local organizations, for the most part, don't have formal product teams. In fact, none of the people. We very specifically chose the participants in our first immersion training from a group of 150-plus applicants, none of them in news organizations that had a formal product team. So it's important, as sort of Millie said, it's important to get your head around this idea that you do not have to have the word "product" in your title to be doing product. I mean, Cindy, you probably realized that we were product team before we did.

Cindy Royal We didn't call it that, but we were on that path.

Aron Pilhofer For sure. So that's a part of it. But I think the biggest challenge is, even for those news organizations that do have formalized product teams, is that they are so separate from the core of the organization. And I don't just mean editorial. I think it's definitely editorial, that's for sure. But even on the revenue side, product teams, with very few exceptions, tend to be sort of shuttle diplomats. Kind of floating around news organizations, trying to build consensus with stakeholders. And that is a very difficult job. It's extremely time consuming. It's wildly inefficient. And I don't think it's the highest and best use of the brilliant people that sit in those jobs for the most part. So culture is part of it, structure, but where those teams sit and fundamentally how you empower them, that is the key piece that we're trying to address.

Cindy Royal So leadership is going to be a key piece in all of this. How about you, Deb. In your past experiences in broadcast, as well as with the partners that you work with now, what are the biggest challenges you see to getting them to recognize that a product culture is even necessary?

Deb Adeogba Well, I think, obviously, Microsoft is a product culture, so it's very easy to have a product culture in an organization that makes products. But in my past life, I think the biggest challenge is; To be able to create a product culture, you have to find a champion, and you have to find allies. That's the first step. Like you have to find the people who are interested in pushing beyond the norm. Right. And any time I've tried to push any product inside of a television station, I always found that one person who I'd show it to them and they'd say, "Oh, that's really cool." And I'd be like, "Yeah, it is really cool. You want to do it with me?" And they're like, "Yes, I do." And from there, it kind of branches out. It's a very simple way to do it, but really that's the way you have to do it. The more people that you can bring on to your team as allies, the more successful you're going to be.

And the other thing that's very important in a product culture is it's great that you can do cool things with products. You can show people, and they'll be like, "Wow, that's amazing."

But it does come down to ROI, usually. Like, how is this going to make us money? And that's, you know, like going back to time, versus expectations, versus money. Just to be honest, it always comes down to is this going to make us money? You know what I mean? So if you can figure out a way to make it cool, get allyship, or even a champion within your newsroom, but also figure out an ROI, whether it's resources or money, I think that's really the way to build up a culture of product inside a newsroom.

Cindy Royal Let the money talk.

Deb Adeogba Yeah, unfortunately.

Cindy Royal Well, several of you mentioned silos in the organization, and I want to ask something that may be a little bit sensitive, but is this a power struggle? Who wants to take that?

Millie Tran I think I mentioned silos and the absence of. So.

Cindy Royal We need to get rid of silos, but I know, Aron, that you have mentioned that there are often categorizations in media organizations that might prevent a product culture from emerging. And so am I correct that there's possibly a power struggle going on here that might be a challenge?

Aron Pilhofer I mean, yeah, but I think the product teams tend, and I'm just painting the very broad brush here, but product teams tend to be sort of stuck in the middle of all of these things because they don't tend to be product owners for the most part. So, you know, and there is a struggle because you have the ad side that used to drive most, if not all, of the growth now becoming actually less important to the future. And now sort of the reader revenue sides are emerging, and so there is a struggle internally for resources between and among these different pillars. And product tends to sit somewhere in between all of them, but doesn't have any direct role in decision making in any of them. And that's where you have to address that problem. I've seen news organizations hire a bunch of product people and go job done and not do a single thing to change the culture and the structure. And guess what happens to those product people? They are going to leave. They're going to leave within eight months, and they're going to say, "Oh, my God, that place is a mess." So, yeah, it's a power problem, but it's a leadership problem. It's about recognizing what product can do and what the right role they should have. And I'm not saying that product should own every product, but at least you need to address that head on.

Cindy Royal I'm going to ask one more thing, and then I'm going to go to some of the audience questions. Given that different products require different skills, for example, a newsletter and a podcast are two really different kinds of products, what are some of the approaches that need to be made in hiring to make the organization as flexible and responsive as possible? I mean, are there broader skill sets? Are there partnerships? Are there particular niches that need to be hired? And I need to know this because I want to train people that will work for you guys, so, Millie?

Millie Tran Yeah, I can start that so, you know, I think about what skills are harder, or hardest, or longer to teach. And this is my bias, but I think, like good news judgment, good storytelling, kind of understanding the values of journalism, is that base right? What you're talking about, the difference between, like podcasts versus newsletters? I've worked in both. The foundation is the same, right? It's about like clearly telling a story. It's about the

journalism. It's about the reporting. I think if you understand that as a base, and then you have the curiosity, and time, and whatever, to learn each of those formats and how people kind of experience those formats. Because they're very different experiences. Right. You can take a story and translate it to a newsletter product and then an audio product, and the experience is quite different. But I think starting at that core of the journalism is key. So I think having that base is critical. But then, you know, understand each of those products, and how they're made. How people experience them. How to iterate on them. How do you corral the different parts of your organization to actually execute on the thing? There are two different things, right. And I think all of that other stuff is very teachable. And I think it really is about having the curiosity to learn all those things, and empathy really.

Cindy Royal So starting with a good foundation of storytelling, and then building the tools on top that you need to best tell that story. How about you, Aron? Ideas about hiring and staffing?

Aron Pilhofer Yeah. I mean, Millie is totally right. You know, it's not a surprise that you find some of the best product managers in the business come from the editorial side. And that might be a correlation, not causation. But there is a difference in products in a media environment, and news environment in particular, than at any sort of startup.com. And I think Deb probably could speak to that actually really directly, because there are elements of product management. There are tricky bits to product management and news environment that don't exist or exist differently in places like Microsoft. I'm sure of that.

Cindy Royal Deb, we can hear from you?

Deb Adeogba I'm just saying I definitely have to explain to my Microsoft coworkers journalism. Because there's nothing like it, right? There's no other workplace like being a journalist. It's just unless you've lived it, it's hard to understand it. Right. But I think I agree with Millie. Like I think some of the people that I've hired over the years, of course, they had journalism degress, and they knew the AP Stylebook backward and forward. And all of that is very important. But I think emotional intelligence is very important because you have to be able to understand your audience. You don't want to spin cycles on a product, and it doesn't resonate with your audience.

Cindy Royal So I have a question here. It was directed toward Aron, but any of you can answer this as well. And the question is, "What influence, insights can product managers bring to shaping a newsroom's strategic goals?"

Aron Pilhofer Yeah, I love this question. I've been thinking about this for a couple of minutes because it's so important. So I'm going to take a bit of liberty and say that newsroom and news organization are the same thing. Maybe I'm not sure she meant the literal newsroom, but I'm assuming she's talking about the news organization. And so the first question is, what are the news organizations strategic goals? Do they even exist? And are they expressed as goals the way that a product mindset would think of them? Or are they sort of vague statements of mission? "We want to be the best ever of this." So I think that's what I'm getting at is, is what the product mindset and product discipline can help bring to that is a process. It is defined, is a framework, is a toolkit for understanding how to approach a big, gnarly problem, like how are we going to stay in business, systematically and approach it in a way that helps you make decisions. This not that kinds of decisions prioritized in a structured way that makes sense. And most importantly, hold yourself accountable ultimately to the decisions that you make. Is this working? Is it having impact? And so how do you know? This is the question we do not ask ourselves nearly enough as

an industry. How do you know? You read Digiday every day and everything, and you go to these panels, and you hear from people about products that they're launching, and everything is going top right. And if you just read Digiday about all this great stuff that's happening, and attended conferences, you'd think this industry was doing fantastic. But the real truth is that for the most part, we are not setting strategies in any sort of systematic way. We are not defining goals in the way that a product person would think of defining goals. We are not doing anything systematic to make sure that we're doing this in a way that's iterative and where tactics and strategy work together synergistically, the first time I've ever used that word in a panel. Anyway, I bottom line is, I think like the practice of product is what a product manager could bring to that process, and we need it so badly.

Millie Tran Aron, I think you're totally right. I was thinking about some of the core competencies of what makes a good product manager, and it's a lot of the things that connect the thing you're doing to your overall strategic goals. And it's like, of course, it's user testing, but it's also like the art and science of resource allocation, maybe just the science. Prioritization, pricing and revenue modeling and defining and tracking success metrics. Like I love what you said about kind of just having value statements versus an actual framework for how to execute on that value statement. And I think that's a trap we often get stuck in.

Cindy Royal I should bring up this question then that we got from YouTube about product management really being a multidisciplinary area. You have to know so many different things about technology, design, journalism, data. And the question is, how do you keep up with all these subjects? How does one keep up with all of these things?

Millie Tran It's just work. There's no magic.

Cindy Royal I mean, for me, it is a commitment to it, and an enthusiasm and an excitement about it, where just this is natural for me to keep up with this stuff all the time. But it's not easy. And I often wonder when I will get to the point where I can't keep up with it. But part of it is that. Like, first of all, understanding the need for it, and then hanging on for dear life, and going along for the ride. Aron, do you want to add anything to that?

Aron Pilhofer I mean, I did not go to the Guardian, as head of the product team. I was the nerdiest senior person left in the building when they needed somebody to step in as interim chief digital officer, and with the naiveté and stupidity of someone totally not prepared for the job, but yet not knowing how unprepared he or she was, I took it. And I tell this story a lot. But on day like four, one of the ad people came into my office and started screaming at me about header bidding, and why we're not doing anything about it. I let the person go for a couple of minutes, stopped them, and said, "Can you please explain to me what header bidding is?" I had no idea. And that was just an inkling of how underwater I truly was in that job. And I definitely was behind where I should have been on a lot of these things, but I don't know that that's super unusual. I mean, there's a reason why Digiday has a "what the fuck is" series that is wildly popular with lots of people who should know "what the f" header bidding actually is.

So what do you do? In my case, I did what I always did and just asked a ton of questions. I found the person in the ad sales tech team who sat in the corner, and like nobody ever talked to this guy. And I said, "Will you just explain to me not just header bidding, but like how digital advertising works? Like, I know vaguely that there's this, and there's this, and there's an auction, and this. But I don't really understand how it all comes together." Next

thing I knew, there was a three-hour meeting on my calendar, and it was the most interesting three hours I have ever spent.

And so I guess that's what I would say. You know, you are not going to know everything you need to know. Nobody is going to know everything you need to know. You have to understand that that's going to be the case and just approach it with that mindset.

Millie Tran I think it's that. Aron, everything you're saying just goes back to, like, having that relentless curiosity, right? Like product management touches so many things. And it's basically, you know, I say I am a systems thinker, and it's really about understanding the whole system. Right. And it's impossible to kind of go deep on everything all the time. But you can pick your hits and prioritize.

Cindy Royal I want to jump back to the hiring question for a second, because we had these really great keynotes the past two days, Emily and Amanda from the 19th and Nikole Hannah-Jones from The New York Times both speaking about the issue of diversity. And diversity in newsrooms, but also when we talk about the tech industry, there's an issue of diversity. And some of these new roles are very tech oriented. Aron, when I visited your team in 2009, it was all men. And I was happy to see a year later that you hired Jacqui Maher, who's now Jacqui Lough, who's on your team at News Catalyst. Hi, Jacqui, if you're watching. But these are challenges, and so maybe we can discuss some of the issues associated with making a more diverse newsroom at the same time as we're trying to make a product culture. Millie, do you want to take that in a newly diverse Texas Tribune?

Millie Tran Yeah, so this kind of goes back to something I said earlier about making it accessible. Right. Showing people that the things that they're already doing are actually, in fact, the thing. I think we spend so much time trying to define like words that product managers use, as if it's a vocabulary problem, and not an understanding of how things work. But, you know, at the end of the day, I think what a product manager does and like what an editor might be doing, are not that different. Right. In terms of understanding who a story is for, making the story, using kind of all the elements available to them, and publishing the story and kind of learning from whatever is happening with that. If you just kind of expand the aperture of that, like you can think of that story as a very small product, and you can kind of scale up in helping them understand that like they're doing the foundational things already. And you just kind of are putting a different framework and helping them see what they're doing in a different way. So I think that that's something that's really important to me. Right. It's not about trying to impose something on someone else, but taking what they're already doing, and redefining it for them, and expanding their understanding of it.

Cindy Royal I want to throw this to Deb next, and then I'll then I'll get Aron's thoughts on this. But since you work for a tech company, what are your thoughts on diverse hiring?

Deb Adeogba You know, I worked in engineering most of my career in television, right, and I was more often than not the only woman in the room, honestly. So, you know, I believe, like I said in my presentation, like I believe that the more diversity we have with any project we do, not even just news, any project, you're going to come out with a better product. Period. And so, you know, I think it's really important to be diverse and inclusive with anything that you do. Because if you want to create a product for your audience and you want that product to really resonate with your audience, you have to represent your audience when you're building that product.

Cindy Royal Absolutely. Aron?

Aron Pilhofer Yeah, totally, and the hiring piece of it is incredibly important. It's obviously a huge, huge, huge problem, and there are ways to fix it. It's just are we willing to actually put the time and effort into it? Well, I want to also say there's a huge problem on the product side as well, because we don't think of product development in terms of DEI. And we should we don't think of how we make products and what impact those products have on people. And there are you know, I'm in Philadelphia, and there are huge parts of the city for who think of the Inquirer, I'm sorry to say, as a fundamentally racist news organization. And that's not necessarily how the people inside the Inquirer view the Inquirer, and that disconnect is the problem, is a big part of the problem as well. I'm not sure exactly how to fix that, but we need to start thinking of this problem internally and externally.

Cindy Royal So we are running out of time on this panel. But I do want to ask one more question that came from the audience, and it has to do with the money question that Deb brought up earlier, as well as, Aron, in your presentation when you said about the theory of change being about creating sustainable businesses. "Product is about people and money, but money is very much missing from the media landscape. So how do you develop a product approach with a newsroom that's already struggling for survival?"

Millie Tran I'll say, you know, I've worked in many newsrooms that had no money. Like that's happened to me a lot. And this is going to sound terrible, but there's a lot of free stuff out there. There's a lot of free stuff out there that you can use. Like most news organizations, unless you're a huge news organization, they don't have developers. You're not going to develop something, and you're not going to pay for a development company to come and develop something for you. But like a good example is live streaming. You can live stream for free. Live streaming, there's so many tools out there. Streamlabs is free. You can use a cell phone to stream. Like you just have to get crafty. That's how it starts. And honestly, if you want to create a product culture and there's no money in the budget for it or it hasn't been allocated to it, that's how you start. You start by showing that you can do these things with free stuff, and then they're like, "Well, maybe we should put a little bit of money into this." And that's kind of how it starts to move forward.

Cindy Royal How about you, Millie? What is the economic aspect of this?

Millie Tran So I've worked in very different newsrooms now. For profit, startup, legacy, now at a nonprofit, and I think the through line in all that is really understanding what business you're in. Right. And like what's driving your business and really understanding how product fits into that. What is it that you are selling? I think you know how I would approach product at The New York Times is wildly different than how I am approaching product now at the Texas Tribune, where our model is about getting our journalism to more people everywhere in Texas. So I'm thinking about slightly different products. Right. So connecting your product strategy, to your business, and values and mission, I think, is kind of where the magic happens, right?

Cindy Royal So, Aron, I want to throw it to you to answer this question, but also regarding this idea of your theory of change and the sustainability of digital businesses, address what happens if they don't change? If they don't accept a product approach?

Aron Pilhofer Well, they'll continue on the path that they have been on for, as we as an industry will continue on the path that we have been on now for, depending on how you counted 20 to 45 years of predictable decline and ultimate demise. And by the way, I'm not suggesting that product is the answer. I'm suggesting the product is a start, is a framework to help address to identify the problem, and start addressing and figuring out what the answer is. For the tiny news organization, we address this actually very directly in the immersion training program. Because none of those news organizations have formal product teams. Someone in there, however, is acting in that role. Someone's making decisions. Because there's a thing in the world. There's a website. There's a newsletter. There's a printed whatever in the world. There's a broadcast. Someone is making product decisions. They just don't think of it that way. They just think they're making whatever decisions. And so the question isn't about people, it's about roles and mindset. And so who in the organization is making those sorts of product decisions is the first place to start. Then the next place to start is how do you start to bring them into this world where we can start thinking about making these decisions more impactfully and systematically toward a strategic goal?

Cindy Royal I mean, I think you're right. It is about mindsets and leadership, as we've said before. And so that would be a good place for all organizations to start with their focus on thinking about the products that they're already creating, and how they can create new ones that solve problems into the future.

I wish we had more time. I could talk about this for hours, and I want to thank everybody who was paying attention to this discussion today. If anybody wants to continue the conversation during the farewell reception, I will be part of that tomorrow. The virtual reception. The one went really well on Monday, and I'm happy to connect with people through Twitter or through email. And so now I will throw it back to Rosental and team, and thank them for all their hard work, and all the sponsors who have made ISOJ so great this year. Thank you, Rosental.

Rosental Alves Wow. Thank you so much. I can't be happier. And this is really great. And, you know, when you're talking, Cindy, about 2009, and I was kind of remembering that you met Aron at ISOJ.

Cindy Royal In 2008, so I could do the research in 2009.

Rosental Alves OK, but, you know, what happened in those 12 years is really amazing, and how product became this important. So it was an incredible day. The fourth day. ISOJ 2020 is going very well. Thank God. I am so happy that you have joined us today.

I want to take a moment to give an incredibly huge thank you to our sponsors Knight Foundation, Google News Initiative, Microsoft, Univision, JSK fellowships at Stanford, the Trust Project and the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin for your contributions and support. I want to thank all this incredible team of very talented group of the Moody College's Knight Center. You can't imagine how complex it is to do this. I feel like I always saw the atmosphere of television with all different feeds and things. It's what we are doing here.

So anyway, I encourage everybody to come tomorrow for the last day, and end the party that will be in a different platform. It is going to be a surprise. We are going to announce tomorrow. It is going to be a 3-D. We are all going to have avatars and walk around. Let's see how it's going to work. But tomorrow at 10, we start with one of the topics that

journalism has been more concerned with these days. Objectivity is not no neutrality. What is the purpose of journalistic inquiry? Tom Rosenstiel will come with a very provocative keynote speech tomorrow. Then we have a workshop on seeking new ideas to fund public interest media in the U.S. and globally. So we're going to talk about the American Journalism Project here in the United States, and we're going to talk about an international fund that has just been created in London to work globally. Then in the afternoon, if you don't know what OSINT is, open source intelligence, there will be a fascinating panel on online investing investigations and use of A.I.. And finally, the last panel will will be also fascinating. How to fight deepfake and cheapfake videos. I think this is going to be a great finale. And then the party. Work hard and party harder. So with this note, I declare officially ended the fourth day of ISOJ. Thank you very much. Appreciate it.