

If the product is news: Zetland case study

The case for tighter newsroom and product collaboration – and a radical approach to building news organizations for the future

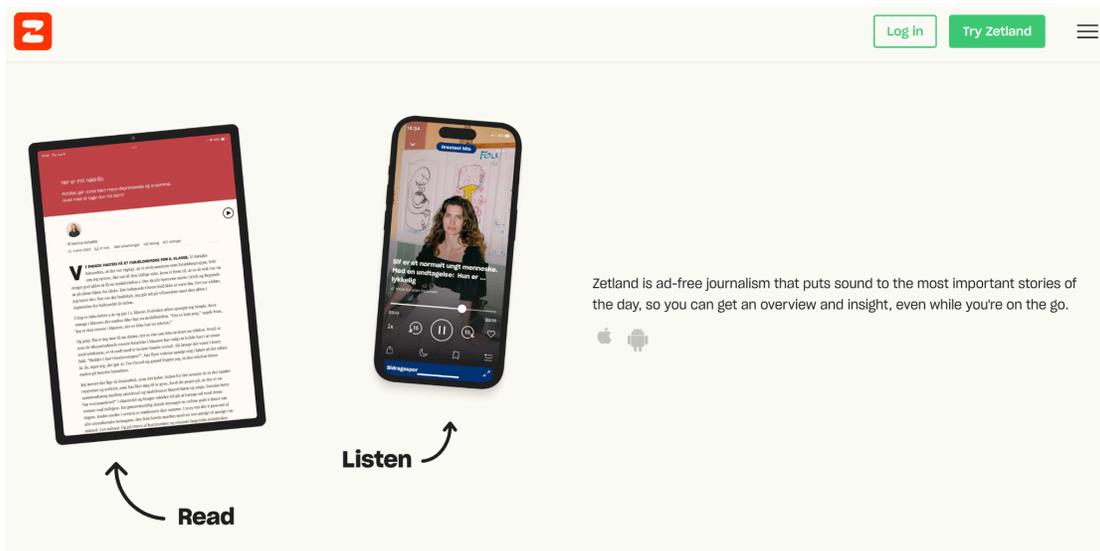
By: Mariah Craddick

This article is part two of a six-part series. New installments will be published over the coming weeks, so check back regularly for the next entries.

[Joining here? Start with part one: The case for tighter newsroom and product collaboration](#)

Zetland

[Zetland](#), a Danish media company launched in 2016, has evolved as a product several times throughout its short (in comparison to legacy media companies) lifetime. Originally founded as a place for long-form journalism or “singles” as they called them, they’ve adapted their product over time, now offering their journalism additionally in the form of audio. And this audio is not just simple text-to-speech you might find on most news sites, but fully produced, human-narrated audio versions. This is after learning that this was how their members preferred to consume their long-form, narrative pieces.



Zetland prides itself on its close connection and deep understanding of its members with one of their core principles being “We are our members.” And it’s this connection and responsiveness

to their audiences' needs that has motivated their continued transformation – and has resulted not only in winning many industry awards, but also rapid membership growth.

In talking to *Zetland's* Head of Product & Growth, Sebastian Winther, and Managing Editor, Thomas Aagaard, it quickly becomes clear how integral product-like thinking is to this success, and how much it's been embraced by every discipline across the organization.

"I don't know if we even have an idea of product as its own separate thing. We really work mindfully on having a product mindset that seeps through the entire organization," Aagaard explained. "When we're redesigning our app, for example, there's an understanding that it's not just a product priority but has to be an editorial priority as well."

To ensure this type of mindset became the normal operating procedure at *Zetland*, they've literally put product at the center and notably do not have anyone currently dedicated as a "product manager." They do have a Head of Product & Growth (Winther mentioned above), design, and a tech team consisting of engineers, but they work cross-functionally with various groups – marketing, editorial, events, etc. – to help guide strategic priorities and define the requirements that ultimately shape the product.

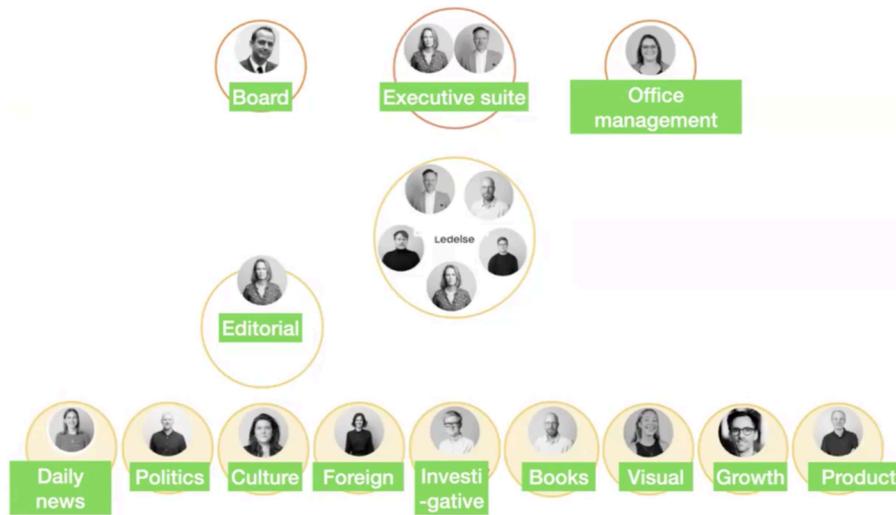
In the current structure, they've created dedicated "steering groups" that are multi-disciplinary and have clear shared objectives. For instance, one group focuses on international expansion while another focuses on incubating new products.

One of these steering groups is called the "bombastic" team, which consists of the CEO, the Head of Product & Growth, the Editor-in-Chief, the Managing Editor, and the Head of Future Audiences & Visual Storytelling. Their goal is to work together on initiatives that will help achieve their ultimate goal of reaching 50,000 paying members in Denmark by 2026. And a lot of the strategy for reaching that goal ends up being product strategy – what to build next and why.

"A lot of decisions start and end in that room. That's how our decision to open up the app as a freemium experience got started. Someone brought data to the group, asked the question of what we could be doing about it, and then someone took ownership to figure it out," Winther explained, noting how having all of these disciplines in the same room, speaking frequently about strategy, enables them to move quickly to decisions and action.

In their previous structure, product existed in its own department as a silo – whereas now, Winther exists in several of these steering groups, including the "bombastic" group and incubator group, ensuring that product is involved and considered in multiple parts of the business. This results in a comprehensive product roadmap that is built in close partnership with every division in the organization.

Our organisational structure looked like this



Previous organizational structure at Zetland with product and editorial as separate siloed teams.

So, we tore everything apart



And concentrated focus where it mattered



New organizational structure at Zetland made up of many cross-functional steering groups who work together consistently.

Collaboration doesn't just happen at the high-level strategic moments either. Once a year, *Zetland* hosts a company-wide offsite (whimsically called "Zetaways") where everyone works together, doing various activities like brainstorms, workshops, and even conducting member interviews where everyone on staff calls a member directly.

"Everyone had to call a member from *Zetland* and ask them, 'How do you find information about society? Take me through an entire day. From when you wake up until you go to bed in the evening, what do you digest?'," Agaard explained. "And instead of just being like, 'When do you turn on or turn off the news?' Instead we're trying to find those moments when our members are seeking information about the world, because it's not just listening to the news in the morning or reading headlines."

This helps everyone at *Zetland* build empathy for the audiences they're serving, a fundamental and core concept of not only product, but journalism itself. Agaard noted that many tangible, concrete concepts come out of these "Zetaways," which they bring back into their daily work to continue to flesh out and execute.

While *Zetland* has managed to make their members and, in turn, the product truly feel at the center of what they do, Agaard and Winther admit they're still some things that can get lost in translation in communicating across functions. For instance, prioritization can be a difficult thing for editorial team members to fully understand. But Agaard noted Winther has a clever technique for making this make practical sense.

“Sebastian will print out all of these ideas for things we might want to do and assign prices to them. And he’ll say ‘You have 1000 kroner [Denmark currency], you can buy three ideas. Which three ideas are you going to buy?’” This helps translate the cost of development resourcing to editorial staff who might not ever deal directly with an engineer. And makes it clear that you can’t prioritize everything.

As *Zetland* continues to evolve their product and grow their staff, they’re making sure to also watch that they don’t “accidentally build siloes,” Aagaard noted.

[Read the third installment of this six-part series: A case study about newsroom and product collaboration at The New York Times.](#)

About the author

Mariah Craddick is a product strategist with deep experience in the news and media industry. She’s currently leading product strategy at The Atlantic with a focus on driving subscription growth and enabling retention through feature adoption and delightful subscriber experiences.

Previously, she led teams as product manager at The Wall Street Journal, McClatchy, and Crain Communications, playing a key role in building features that drive readership and engage subscribers. Prior to her product management career, she held several roles across the newsroom – from writing for the legendary Ebony and Jet magazines to executing social media strategy at Crain’s Chicago Business.

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