

NSTR (or "Nothing Significant to Report") started as a Facebook chat in 2018 before making a move to Discord and then Microsoft Teams. Following the sunset of Microsoft Teams Free (classic) in 2023, NSTR made the jump back to Discord (*shown here*), where it now features threaded conversation and is free to use. (Screenshot from authors)

Building and Running an Online Forum

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Online forums are the latest home for Army mentorship. Going back to antiquity, from ancient Roman camps to the continental salons, through the now-defunct officer clubs, societies build informal venues to pass tacit knowledge

or discuss ideas. The key upgrade with online forums is they allow us to collaborate across both time and space, making it easier for everyone to engage. We started one of these forums in 2018, which we named NSTR.

Social Media Spectrum

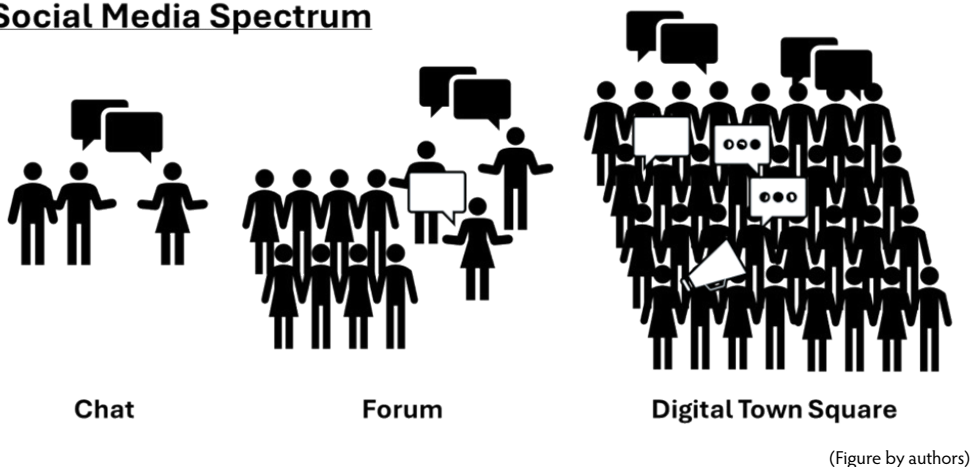


Figure. Social Media Spectrum

NSTR (ostensibly named for “Nothing Significant to Report,” but in truth we couldn’t come up with a better name) started as a Facebook chat used by a small group of midgrade officers to share articles, ideas, and memes.¹ Over the years, the community expanded one at a time as we recruited from an ever-widening geography and background. Since its inception, NSTR has come to include a diverse group of service members, academics, writers, and tech nerds, with membership hovering between 125 and 175. NSTR membership includes soldiers with ranks from staff sergeant to colonel as well as retirees and civilians.

In 2021, we stood up a sister site on the Special Operations Command’s Microsoft Teams site, “Think, Drink, Write, Fight” (TDWF), which currently has

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Army, has over sixteen years of experience in special operations. He is a Gen. Wayne A. Downing Scholar with master’s degrees from King’s College London and the London School of Economics. His assignments have taken him from village stability operations in rural villages in Afghanistan to preparing for high-end conflict in the First Island Chain.

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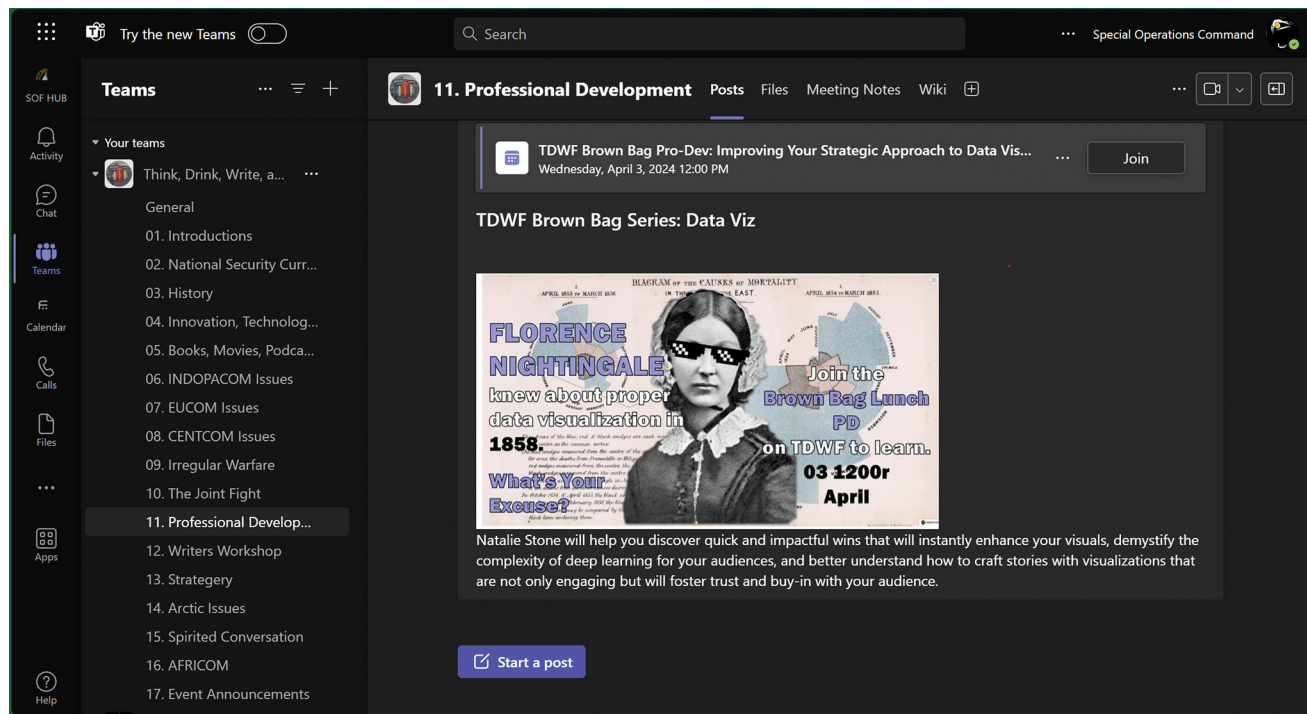
approximately 1,200 members. In the last five years, we have learned a few lessons on how to stand up and run an online forum. Your community may already exist but in a legacy email chain or a chaotic mega-chat thread. Moving forward, whether you are starting a new forum or trying to modernize an existing one,

we offer some considerations to help with the process based on our experience.

Where to Run the Forum

A simple direct message chat among friends is the easiest to start. You’re probably already in a couple, but these tend to only support a handful of people, which limits the variety of perspectives. Running a chat stream gets jumbled and comments get buried when multiple conversations start going. Alternatively, digital town squares like X and Reddit serve as broadcast platforms with incredibly low barriers to entry. These reach maximum audience size but are also vulnerable to online trolls. In between these options sit online community sites like Discord, Teams, or Bluesky. These provide a messaging platform balanced between the simple group chat and a massive broadcast. Look for one that provides threaded conversations and channels to help your forum sustain multiple conversations at one time. These different threads can be categorized, allowing people to focus their attention on topics of interest and ensuring the discussions stay generally thematic (see the figure).

You do not have to choose just one option. Large platforms offer chat, video, or audio tools to collaborate. In fact, many of the smaller tools exist within the larger ones. But you do need to decide where you want the forum to live. Common access card-enabled sites provide a tension between security versus access. Do you want your soldiers to be able to access it on their phones at the end of their day? Is this just for your



A professional development advertisement on the Think, Drink, Write, Fight Teams site. (Screenshot from authors)

unit or a community that lasts beyond the next permanent change of station? These are the fundamental questions you must answer to scope the forum and ensure it is designed for your intended purposes. For maximum reach, try looking for services that allow you to log in via an app and a browser. We also prefer ones that make it easy to copy and paste posts, as we tend to repost across forums. This will give your ideas their maximum chance to spread.

Back in 2018, we started at Discord, but quickly moved to Microsoft Teams, since Discord did not do threaded conversations at the time. But in 2023, with the sunset of “Microsoft Teams Free (classic),” we had no way to port our old threads to the new version without paying for an upgrade. So, we jumped NSTR back to Discord, where threaded conversations had become available. It even featured an effortless video chat. Despite the many available options, the key features a platform needs to thrive as a forum are threaded conversations and a cost of \$0.

Who Runs It

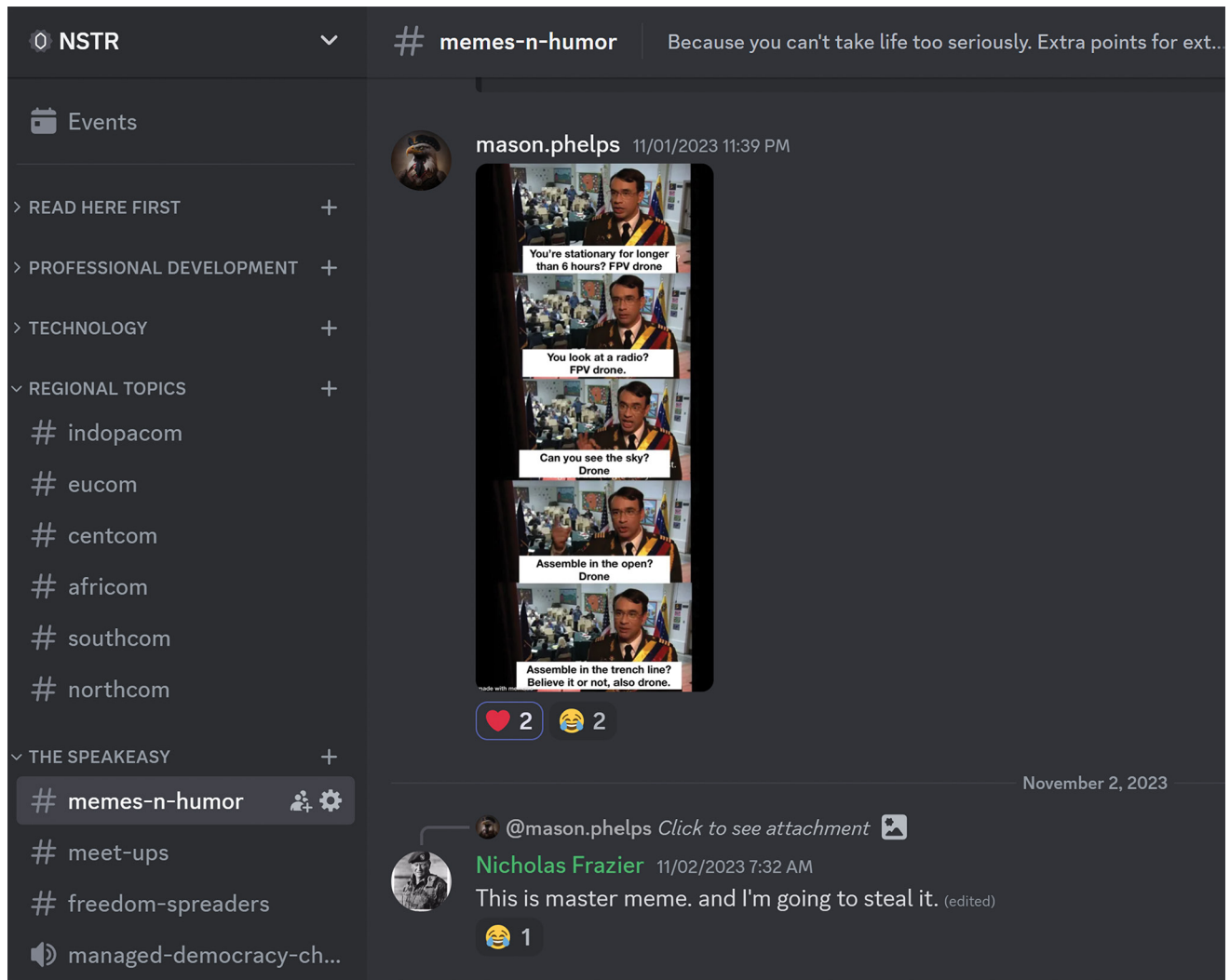
Forums do not require much backside support; however, you may want to consider some best practices to keep things moving. How do you add people to the

forum? Are they recruited, or is it part of in processing your unit? Who is checking to make sure they get access? We recommend having a couple of people who make sure new members get a welcome. This can be as simple as an @ing someone or sending them a direct message. This is also the perfect time to send them any “how to” guides you might have.

Introduction posts help onboard new users and provides the group a running “who is who” list for current members. Community rules encourage users to keep their information current with changing roles, interests, and promotions.

Any online forum is going to be mostly lurkers: people who read posts but do not reply or respond. That is not a problem, but without active posters there is nothing to read. Do not be afraid to run an editorial calendar of sorts when you start out. Like a watercooler cork board, regular posts draw people to rhythmically check the forum. Until the forum starts to self-sustain with community conversations, these can help build the habit.

Consider having a few select people who post and share articles to keep people returning. These can also be your designated responders. When a new soldier shares an article with nothing more than a link and



The "memes-n-humor" text channel on the NSTR Discord. (Screenshot from authors)

"Interesting ..." a dedicated group of people nudging the conversation with "Yes, ands" will help draw out better formed thoughts from the original poster. What was it that caught your eye in this? What did you disagree with? Who else do you think should read this?

Digital forums also provide new tools to level up your conversations like effortless audio and video chatting—a more human way to connect. Brown bag presentations, show-and-tells, lectures, or even online happy hour mixers are a way to attach faces and voices to the cold chat threads. And you can record them for people to watch when it suits their schedules. This is a key feature when your members are dispersed across different time zones; there is a twelve-hour time difference between east Asia and the U.S. East Coast. Done well, this drives water cooler traffic to your forum.

A forum's size mirrors its function. British anthropologist Robin Dunbar found that many social groups cap out around 150 people.² While this may seem small, it can also be a key feature to making your forum productive, as it helps build a sense of community. Members who feel like they belong to a larger community with shared purpose find it easier to disagree on ideas, since they identify with something larger than the positions at debate.³ This should preclude a lot of the trolling and bad faith posts you see on large public sites. However, establish rules of conduct, be prepared to remove posts that cross those lines, and be prepared to remove a user if they repeatedly step over that line. In five years, NSTR has only had to do this once.

One more controversial thing we strongly encourage is a meme channel. While senior leaders across the

Army have raised concerns about “getting memed,” this is just the latest incarnation of the skits of yesteryear. Militaries the world over have always encouraged dry wit and warrior poets. A channel for a light-hearted joke can be an easy place to put a toe in the water before posting a much bigger idea. If you insist on narrow topics, you risk people moving the conversation elsewhere. As above, have a standard, and enforce it as necessary.

Conclusion

The measure of effectiveness for your online forum will be the discussions themselves: the ability to expose a diverse audience to varying opinions, create a safe environment for controversial ideas, and debate the arguments posed by others in articles. A catalyst paper, like the one Max Ferguson proposes in “Catalyst Papers: A Practical Writing Style for Army Leaders to Share Ideas,” included in this special edition, needs a place to catch fire, to grow, and to improve as it weathers testing and rebuttal.⁴

You may not be the one to write, but you can do your part by building and tending the furnace that encourages

sparks. Embers do not catch fire alone in a vacuum. Every published article made its journey through some sort of testing and tempering. If run well, your forum can be a foundry of the Army’s future.

We all read more than we write. We ran NSTR for almost five years before either of us published an article. Instead, we focused on curating a space that fostered growth, ideas, and learning. The true value was connecting like-minded people from across the Army and other services. Over the years, these connections created real-world results like published articles, professional projects, and even job hires. This success motivated us to finally sit down and write our first article last year, which was the catalyst for this guide.⁵

A published article is the best way for the Army to share an idea across the entire formation and to capture it forever, another boulder in the slow-moving glacier of knowledge. That output is a great step, but the last in a long and necessary process. Not everyone will write a journal article, but everyone can play their role in the process by establishing and fostering a learning forum within their own organization. ■

Notes

1. Erik Davis and Nick Frazier, “Drink, Think, Link: Guiding Online Mentorship,” *Military Review* Online Exclusive, 7 February 2024, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/online-exclusive/2024-ole/davis/>.

2. Sheon Han, “You Can Only Maintain So Many Close Friendships,” *The Atlantic* (website), 20 May 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2021/05/robin-dunbar-explains-circles-friendship-dunbars-number/618931/>.

3. *The Internet Is Worse Than Ever—Now What?*, YouTube video, posted by “Kurzgesagt—In a Nutshell,” 2:42–3:10, 29 November 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuFlMtZmvY0>.

4. Max Ferguson, “Catalyst Papers: A Practical Writing Style for Army Leaders to Share Ideas,” *Military Review* Online Exclusive, 16 January 2024, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2024-OLE/Ferguson/>.

5. Davis and Frazier, “Drink, Think, Link.”

“For *The Infantry Journal*, I wrote some articles on the theory of armored operations. Shortly thereafter came a letter from Fuller asking where I got my ideas. I replied that I had none and knew nothing about armor, but that I had written after reading his texts, either to agree or disagree.”

—S. L. A. Marshall, “Genesis to Revelation,” *Military Review* 52, no. 2 (February 1972): 24