ADVANCES IN MILITARY JOURNALISM EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF THE DINFOS STRATEGIC PLAN

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Abstract

In the last 20 years the American journalism industry has undergone a series of great structural changes while simultaneously battling for its economic survival. (Pew, 2023)

The techniques and tactics, products and profits, venues and audiences from a generation ago are largely unrecognizable today (Franklin, 2014).

It is this uncertain communications climate today's journalism students, and *military* journalism students, find themselves heading towards. And it is in this climate that today's journalism *schools* also find themselves in as they endeavor to teach and train the next generation of journalists. Therefore, the American military's journalism school, The Defense Information School (DINFOS) will be the focus of this project.

To complete this project, I interviewed DINFOS students, administrators, teachers and military journalists presently working in the field. I also extensively reviewed the schoolhouse's five-year plan, and closely examined three specific courses to properly gauge whether or not the schoolhouse is preparing their students for this uncertain and unrecognizable communications climate. And lastly, I relied on my own professional perspective as a two-time graduate of the schoolhouse.

As a taxpayer funded entity, the American military has a responsibility to accurately, and in a timely manner, report on its actions to the American public. Their mission embedded in the First Amendment, the DINFOS-educated military journalists working across the globe perform a vital mission in our democracy.

At the conclusion of this project, I can state confidently that DINFOS *is* properly preparing and educating their students for this uncertain communications climate.

Introduction

The Defense Information School, known colloquially in military circles as "DINFOS," is the US military's Journalism School. Based at Fort Meade, Maryland, DINFOS trains soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, Coast Guardsmen, and Guardians, to become "mission capable" military journalists. Established in 1946 at the Army's Carlisle Barracks as the Army Information School, DINFOS teaches military service members basic journalism skills that include writing, still photography, broadcast journalism, graphic design, and social media management.

DINFOS was founded immediately following World War II. Prior to the founding of the schoolhouse, the mission of informing the American public on military matters was handled by the civilian press. Recognizing the need for, and the importance of communicating with the American public to ensure their support of the war effort, the Department of Defense founded the schoolhouse. Military leaders at the time placed a great emphasis on a "well-informed fighting force and a well-informed public." (DINFOS, 2023)

Since I first attended DINFOS in 2005 as an enlisted Airman, and then again in 2011 when I attended DINFOS for a second time, albeit then as an Air Force officer, the overall communication landscape has changed dramatically and at a dramatic pace. Digital and social media technologies have upended not only *how* we communicate but also *what skills* are required to communicate properly. Whereas in 2005 I was taught newspaper design as a DINFOS student, today's students are instead taught social media skills and "environmental scanning" (Scheffler2023) so that they are better able to communicate in today's media climate. The Base Newspaper, often a favorite of senior leadership and military retirees - and which I spent countless hours and days designing, editing, and publishing - has become an irrelevant dinosaur. The demise of the military newspaper nearly mimics the slow decline of the civilian newspaper industry. (Wallin, 2023)

To combat such daunting and abrupt challenges, DINFOS implemented a Strategic Plan 2023-2028 that lays out the schoolhouse's values, mission, strategic priorities and "lines of effort" towards creating mission-capable graduates who will be able to communicate effectively in this media climate (cite the plan here). The strategic plan, written by schoolhouse administrators and senior military journalists, is in basic terms, DINFOS' "plan of attack."

Created in the "transformational years" of 2021 and 2022 (McNorton, 2023) the strategic plan enunciates and codifies the schoolhouse's commitment to modernization, leveraging technology, improving their training resources, and developing their workforce.

DINFOS has already implemented parts of the Strategic Plan by making specific changes to their curriculum, teaching and classroom technologies, courses offered, and course design. In this project, I evaluate how well these changes align with DINFOS's mission and how well they are preparing military journalists to work in a profession that will only accelerate in its pace of change. I also identify major challenges and limitations that DINFOS is facing in preparing the next generations of military journalists and public affairs officers and suggest

possible solutions. As a former DINFOS student and civilian journalist, and as a career military officer, I hope this project can serve as an audit of the schoolhouse's plans, efforts, and early results from an outsider's distanced perspective enhanced by an insider's knowledge of the particular needs, demands and responsibilities of military journalism.

Methods

This project seeks to answer the question, "Is the Department of Defense adequately training and educating its professional communication specialists (military journalists) for the current, and rapidly evolving, media environment?"

In order to address this question, I reviewed DINFOS's 2023-2028 Strategic Plan, in which the schoolhouse leadership spells out their commitment, their process, their values, and their priorities in training qualified, competent and "mission-capable" graduates. I also reviewed specific changes that DINFOS has implemented to its curriculum, teaching and classroom technologies, courses offered, and course design. Finally, I conducted interviews with former DINFOS students, current instructors, faculty, and administrators, and a current military Public Affairs manager who hires and works with graduates of the DINFOS program; and I reflected on my own experiences as a former DINFOS student and journalist.

Interviews

I interviewed DINFOS Provost Mary O'Shea and former DINFOS Deputy Commandant Air Force Colonel Tony Wickman; with DINFOS instructors Mary Huizinga and Air Force Senior Master Sergeant Russ Scalf; and with DINFOS students Air Force Airman 1st Class Tylin Rust and Army Lieutenant Jake Scheffler. Interviews were conducted via email, phone, video conferencing, and in-person, based on the location and availability of my sources who, as active military personnel, had full and inflexible schedules. These interviews were journalistic in nature, meaning they are meant to gather qualitative information and expertise-based feedback rather than quantitive data for formal analysis. As such, they do not require IRB Human Subjects approval. These interviews were conducted to help document how and why DINFOS developed its FY 2023-FY 2028 Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan puts into writing schoolhouse's intent to modernize their curriculum and lays out a multi-point plan for doing so. The interviews also helped document how these modernization efforts are being implemented in the classroom, and how students are evaluating these efforts. [See full list of interview questions in Appendix A]

Strategic Plan

- DINFOS' Strategic Plan is a 5-year, 19-page document that encompasses a broad range of concerns. In my review of the Plan, I focused on four aspects that speak directly to the question of how and how well DINFOS is preparing the next

> generation of military journalists and public affairs officers. These include: Value #2 (Innovation)

- Strategic Priority #2 (Mission-Capable Graduates)
- Line of Effort #2(Training & Education)
- Line of Effort #3 (Modernize & Expand)

I chose these four points because out of all of the proclamations and plans listed in the FY 2023-FY 2028 Strategic Plan, these four specifically relate to the question I am exploring. I reviewed and analyzed these four points first by closely reading and re-reading the FY 2023-FY 2028 Strategic Plan. Once I identified the points most relevant to this project, I used them to guide the questions I asked in my interviews, to focus my review of the current course syllabi, and also to compare and contrast my experiences at the schoolhouse with today's schoolhouse environment. For example, for **Value #2** (Innovation), I looked for innovative changes and updates in the course descriptions included on the syllabi. When conducting my interviews, I asked questions regarding any updates or changes which could be considered "innovative," such as if the in-classroom equipment had been upgraded.

Finally, I employed this innovation-minded and update-focused approached to the entirety of this project. I was continually asking, others and myself, how what I was learning about today's overall DINFOS environment could be considered "innovative." I then used this approach for all four of the aforementioned points.

Originally a list of nine courses, the three DINFOS courses I selected for a closer look include:

1) Mass Communications Foundations + 4 Writing
2) Mass Communications Foundations Course - 87 Days Version
3) Public Affairs & Communication Strategy Qualification Course (PACS-Q)

I examined three courses identical, or near identical to, the courses I attended during my two visits to DINFOS. In addition, I chose these courses because of my level of familiarity with them and also because I know recent graduates from each class, which helped me in getting the interviews I needed.

I analyzed the syllabi for these three courses, searching for what topics were similar to what I was taught, and what topics have since been added.

Regarding the specific class content, the current classes varied from what I learned 15 and 12 years ago in a variety of ways. Fifteen years ago, there was no option to attend a DINFOS course remotely, via online classes, as there is now for the entry-level Mass Communications Foundations course. Beyond that, DINFOS course content has moved away from on-page print skills and content, and instead towards on-screen, digital content and methods.

Literature Review: Journalism in Transition

The review of literature confirms that journalism, and by extension journalism education, is going through a period of transition.

The American journalism industry has been suffering for decades (Pope, 2018). Since the late 1990s, the internet, online advertising, news aggregation services, and other digital threats have reduced a once proud and vital industry to a weak, dwindled shell of the powerhouse it once was. Newspaper circulation numbers have been on a downward slope since the early 1990s and advertising and circulation dollars have been steadily dropping since 2006 (Pew, 2023)

Readership and viewership habits for other mediums fared no better. TV viewership, website visits, App downloads and social media engagement all dipped. (Fisher, 2021)
It is in the midst of this pessimistic and chaotic climate today's new journalists, and new *military journalists*, find themselves in. For the focus of this project, I will focus on the military journalists. Military journalists are educated and trained at the Defense Information School, DINFOS. This project will examine if this school is properly preparing today's students for this climate.

Various authors give names to the journalistic era of the past, and the era ahead of us, Waisbord calls the past era "industrial journalism." Gilmore refers to today's iteration as "tomorrow's media." Whatever the nicknames and titles may be, the recognition is clear that journalism education must adapt. Having worked for eight years in a downtown Milwaukee building which housed the heavy machinery of the printing press, I wholeheartedly agree with Waisbord's "industrial" moniker. Whenever I had the privilege to see the presses up close I was astonished by their heft and their complexity. It was like looking at the mechanical cousin of a locomotive.

In the 2014 piece, "The Future of Journalism: In an age of digital media and economic uncertainty," Franklin describes this current era as one of "moment of mind-blowing uncertainty." Given the statistics listed by in the Pew piece, one can hardly argue against such a description.

In a 2019 piece, when describing the current journalism working environment, Waisbord "repurposes" journalism's 5 W's and 1 H. It is his final "W," *Why*, which most appeals to this project.

The "Why," according to Waisbord, is a broader concept in Digital Journalism. Digital Journalism isn't motivated by the usual reasons (money, audience growth, advocacy), rather he writes, Digital Journalism "represents many more purposes. Multiple actors have many motivations to participate in news-making. Individuals are driven by information, self-presentation, and social connection and support. Companies pursue corporate branding and reputation fixing. Social media corporations set to make money and drive up profits. Social activists want to make demands and change policies and public opinion. Political

propagandists spread news to deceive voters. Legislation mandates government agencies to disseminate news and information."

Gilmore's 2014 Media Shift piece, writes that the "imploding" business of journalism can, will, and should affect journalism education. He writes that "journalism educators need to be thinking a lot more about the second category (the creation of new critical thinkers), but also in broader ways about the first (the creation of new journalists)."

Two years later in his 2016 Journalism Practice article, Gilmore writes that journalism schools aren't doing a good enough job preparing their students for success after graduation. He warns, "Our raison d'être is open to question largely because the employment pipeline of the past in jeopardy."

His warnings continue, "journalism schools as a group may have been even slower to react to the huge shifts in the craft and its business practices. Only recently have they embraced digital technologies in their work with students who plan to enter traditional media."

His final shot at academia hits home, "Too few are helping students understand that they may well have to invent their own jobs, much less helping them do so."

Additionally, Gilmore admits he sees the journalism environment similarly to Waisbord, in that we now find ourselves in a new era. While Waisbord referred to the recently completed era as "Industrial Journalism," Gilmore instead names it with the basic term "Traditional" journalism/media and refers to the next era of simply as "Tomorrow's Media."

Most recently, Kirchhoff examines "the challenges of digitalization and the aims of adequate journalism education." Her work may be the most valuable piece of research I've read. Her 2022 article "Journalism Education's Response to the Challenges of Digital Transformation: A Dispositive Analysis of Journalism Training and Education Programs," speaks directly to my area of focus with regard to DINFOS' curriculum.

And I agree wholeheartedly with her take. Just as Gilmore criticizes journalism education institutions for a slow reaction in his 2016 piece, Kirchhoff speaks of an "urgent need," and I agree with her. The continuous and rapidly changing nature of the communication environment, combined with the dangerously unsteady economics of the industry (Pew, 2023) all add up to situation very well described as "urgent." She writes that while "*teaching* journalism (is) rarely reflected upon," there exists nonetheless "an urgent need" when considering "the disruptive effects of digital media technologies and their use."

Kirchhoff' writes that journalism schools "adapt their programs in order to respond to the practical demands of professional journalism in the digital age." She continues, "just as journalism as a whole is tasked with responding to the "urgent need" of digital transformation, so is journalism education." She does indeed use the phrase "urgent need" multiple times in her piece - four times in total - perhaps as a way to reenforce her point. Therefore, it is through the lens of these authors' perspectives this literature review will investigate DINFOS' battle plan and tactics in the face of the changing media landscape:

Franklin's "uncertainty," Gilmore's "employment pipeline" and "slow reacting" critique; Kirchhoff's "urgent need" about the "disruptive effects of digital media;" Waisbord's "many purposes" and "multiple actors" which comprise Digital Journalism. These various assessments will all serve as map points and guardrails along this expedition.

Findings

After reviewing the DINFOS Strategic Plan, reviewing Course Descriptions for three core DINFOS classes, speaking with two recent DINFOS graduates to gauge their impressions of their education, interviewing four DINFOS teachers and administrators, I've concluded that the schoolhouse is doing an adequate job of preparing their graduates. I will discuss the DINFOS Strategic Plan in the final portion of this section.

To best prepare their students, and to create in the words of the Strategic Plan, "Mission Capable graduates," DINFOS updated their curriculum towards teaching their students the most current communication skills used in the field. They've done this in a variety of ways.

I explored and created this project through this lens of my personal journalism mass communications experience which spans nearly 20 years. I used all of this personal experience to gauge the span of progress across nearly 20 years and to conclude whether or not the schoolhouse is properly preparing their students.

Just as with elements of the Strategic Plan, the personal experience portion this project is closely tied to my choices for the curriculum review. My reasoning for choosing the three courses for review was largely based upon my ability to compare and contrast my experiences and what I learned *then* with today's students' experiences and what they're learning *now*. Beyond the DINFOS classroom aspect, my personal experience as a military journalism practitioner, and overall journalism consumer, also helped inform this portion of the paper.

During the course of my personal experience in this military journalism career field, I've seen methods of communication come and go. And then in the case of graphic design, come back again. I have witnessed the death of the base newspaper and the local hometown newspaper. I've seen social media apps such as Vine come on to the scene and fade away just as quickly as quickly as they arrived. I've seen working journalists double fist camera equipment; a digital SLR camera in the right hand, and an iPhone in the left hand, simultaneously shooting still photos *and* video. I've witnessed an NFL player, upon leaving the football field victorious, handed a cell phone so that they may record their *own* video message to their thousands of fans.

I've also seen the overall industry upended by an onslaught of new communication methods brought forth by the internet, mobile technology, and social media. Further, I watched the overall journalism industry decimated economically due to a unsustainable business model. The subsequent purging of newsroom staffs cost the jobs of thousands of journalists, including my own.

Additionally, my interviews of the two recent graduates Rust and Scheffler helped immensely. By speaking with them, was able to ask direct questions pinpointing specific skills and topics the classes either *did* or *didn't* teach. From their responses, in concert with reviews of their respective class syllabus, I was well able to gauge how the classes had

evolved. With Rust, I learned that the entry level enlisted course was now teaching graphic design and crime scene photography while removing lessons teaching page design. Rust's class also spent time differentiating social media platforms. Her class studied and discussed which content is best suited to which social media platform. Scheffler's officer class also examined social media with regard to which platform was best for which type of content. "We spent quite a bit of time on social media," he said. "The instructors were always prompting us 'what's your story, *why* are you posting it there?'" Their conclusions were as insightful. "If you wanted to reach the masses, you used Facebook. If you wanted to communicate the fastest, you used Twitter," he added.

Regarding the specific classes, in the Mass Communications Foundations + 4 Writing class, the schoolhouse adapted the class by making it a Distance Learning Only course and adding Research Methods as a class topic. Similar to the Research Methods lesson taught to UWSP Comm. 101 students, DINFOS students taking this course will learn how to fully rely on the credibility of their sources. I wasn't taught how to conduct research or verify sources when I attended DINFOS and I conclude that Research Methods was added to MCF in response to the growing credibility challenges one finds with online and digital news sources, a problem that wasn't as prevalent then as it is very much so now. On the other side of that thought process, outdated skills such as Headline Writing and Page Design were removed from MCF. This alteration was likely in recognition of the current communication climate in which print publications are a fading, seldom used communication method. Why bother and waste valuable class time teaching skills that won't be used by the students upon graduation?

Regarding the Mass Communications Foundations Course - 87 Days Version, an examination of the syllabus revealed that the schoolhouse moved the curriculum forward by adding a topic phased out a decade prior.

Once its own AFSC, *Graphic Designer*, the schoolhouse was again teaching students graphic design skills in the Graphic Design Fundamentals and Applied Graphic Design blocks of instruction of the MCF-87 course. Reintroducing graphic design skills to the curriculum was a recognition that modern digital communication requires practitioners able to communicate with not just words, photographs, and videos, but also with graphics, memes, gifs and the like.

An AFSC stands for "Air Force Specialty Code, "i.e. the manner in which the Air Force categorizes an individual's job category. As a Public Affairs Officer, I was categorized as a 31P3. The "31P" represented the Public Affairs job category and the "3" represented my Skill Level upon graduation. The Air Force has three Skill Levels – 3, 5 and 7.

And in the Public Affairs & Communication Strategy Qualification Course, the schoolhouse updated the course by adding Social Media Tactics and Strategies to the curriculum.
"We learned something called Environmental Scanning, it was a form of Media Strategy and analyzing News Metrics," Scheffler said.

An entry level, short course for writing, the Mass Communications Foundation Course +4 Writing, teaches students foundational news and feature writing skills. Beyond basic reading fundamentals, students are also taught how to conduct research, vet sources and conduct interviews.

This course appears very similar to the first few weeks of the course I attend in 2005, except for the "Non-Resident" nature of the course. During the early weeks of my education in 2005, we were taught, and taught again, basic English fundamentals and rudimentary writing skills.

It should not go unnoticed that, while not a specific teaching technique or teaching topic, the "Non-Resident" aspect of this course does reflect an update by the schoolhouse to better accommodate student needs in that not everyone is able to re-locate to central Maryland for a writing class.

Next, I reviewed the Mass Communications Foundations Course - 87 Days Version course, referred to as "MCF" by those at DINFOS.

This course is the modern version of the "Basic Public Affairs-Writer" (BPAS-W) I took in the spring of 2005. An introductory Military Journalism course, BPAS-W taught us journalism fundamentals such as leads, bridges, news and feature stories. We also were taught short portions on basic steel photography using digital cameras and digital page design.

In addition to the journalism skills, we were also taught media relations, specifically how to write press releases, how to conduct on camera interviewing skills, and how to plan and host a press conference.

Today's iteration of the course, the 87-day MCF course, is an in-resident course only and, with regard to the 107-day version, does not include the multi-media feature project. "MCF is the Functional Areas and Functional Disciplines of PA and communications, the students also learn writing skills, but a lot less than you did (in 2005)," said Patricia Huizinga, Department Head, Mass Communication Foundations at DINFOS.

Air Force Airman 1st Class Tylin Rust is a recent DINFOS MCF graduate. She attended the course in 2022 from January to July. She's station at the 148th Fighter Wing in Duluth, Minnesota. "The class starts you off at the basic level," she said.

MCF covers seven Functional Areas, i.e. chapters:
1) Writing/Comm. Fundamentals
2) Photo Fundamentals
3) Graphic Design Fundamentals
4) Video Fundamentals
5) Applied Photography
6) Applied Communication - Narrative Writing
7) Applied Graphic Design

It's a two-year degree, in six months," Rust said.

The MCF syllabus describes the course as "an entry-level multidisciplinary assignment in public affairs, visual information, and communication supporting commander's intent, themes and messages."

"They taught us anything and everything in Public Affairs. We spent a lot of time with the camera, shooting video with controlled action and uncontrolled action, writing and interviewing skills, a bunch of graphics - vector and Illustrator and Photoshop, and InDesign. I came out a better photographer, I was taught a year's worth (of photography) experience," Rust said.

The MCF course differed from BPAS-W in a few obvious ways a course would be expected to evolve across a 17-year timespan. Gone was any mention of producing a Base Newspaper and the accompanying lessons in page design. The new focus was on Social Media techniques and strategy.

"They (the instructors) did talk about the 'old school' stuff," Rust said. "This is what we used to do. They did talk about the historical aspects of the career field."

But Rust and her classmates instead were instructed on new communication tactics and strategies, largely regarding social media.

"We were taught how to build our audience, how to plot our posts, how to choose the right spot so that we stay relevant," she said. "But you don't need to post every day, and you definitely don't want to over-post."

Lastly, the Public Affairs & Communication Strategy Qualification Course (PACS-Q), is the course which most closely resembles my 2011 course I took as a junior Air Force Public Affairs Officer.

The course I took in 2011 was referred to as PAQC, the Public Affairs Qualification Course. This new title includes obviously includes the phrase communication strategy, the most obvious difference between today's iteration, and my 2011 iteration.

During PAQC in 2011, I learned more of an upper-level Editor set of skills. While we were still taught some basic writing elements - how to write press releases, how to prepare talking points for senior leaders, etc., - PAQC instead taught us how to run a news organization, strategize a news team's focus and direction, and manage it communication strategy over an extended period of time.

Today's course, PACS-Q, in addition to having a cooler sounding acronym ("PAX-Q"), goes beyond what I learned in 2011 to include social media strategies and tactics.
According to the course syllabus, PACS-Q's educational focus is centered on three topics:

1) The communication planning process
2) Principles and techniques for implementing effective communication strategies
3) The processes of integrating communication into military planning and operations

While interviewing a recent PACS-Q graduate, Army Lieutenant Jake Scheffler, (also a UWSP graduate), I learned that the course goes beyond what I was taught 12 years ago with regards to it's social media focus.

PACS-Q teaches not just about which social media platform to post content to, but also more granular detail, in that does your intended social media post seek to reach a large audience, or broadcast your information most quickly?

Army Public Affairs Officer, 1st Lt. Jake Scheffler, recently graduated from PACS-Q. He is also a UW-Stevens Point alumni. As a member of the Army Reserves' 201st Theatre PA Support Element, stationed in southern California. He had much to say about his DINFOS education.

"The class exceeded expectations," he said when asked to give feedback on his DINFOS experience. "It was intense, fast. But it was also well-planned and well-designed," he added. And while Scheffler and his classmates spend ample time on communication basics, they also covered new methods, i.e. – social media – extensively.

"We spent quite a lot of time on social media," he said. "We had one older classmate who did like social media, he said 'I think it's the Devil,' but the instructors told him to ' get with the times, this is the future.'"

The PACS-Q students, similar to Rust and her classmates, studied not just the how of social media, i.e. – how to post a photo, how to create an Instagram story – but also the why, the where, and the when.

"We were always driven to ask ourselves, 'what's your story, why are you posting it there?'" Scheffler said. "You want to get your story everywhere you can, but within reason," he added. "Facebook will reach the masses, but Twitter will find the audience the fastest." The students were advised on the frequency of their professional social media activity. "Consistency is important, you do want to maintain a regular posting schedule," he said. "But don't just post to post," he cautioned. "You need to decide carefully if a post makes sense, is relevant to your audience."

In addition to updating the classes they teach, DINFOS has also dedicated itself to regular periodic reviews of their content. "We needed to make a change," said DINFOS Provost Mary O'Shea.

"We've always tried to evolve," Wickman added. "Every year, DINFOS reviews its course content."

With input from each of branch of service, the schoolhouse administration continuously evaluates themselves so that they can be assured they are teaching the right skills and making use of the most modern equipment, all towards the goal of creating graduating classes chock full of Mission Capable individuals.

With regard to the instructional technologies, the schoolhouse added the "Gen V" in-classroom equipment, providing teachers the gear to demonstrate course lessons on a internet-connected big screen, bring in guest speakers via video chat technology, and allow for real time Internet-connected research and problem solving. The "Gen V" gear created a more interactive, fluid, and digital teaching experience.

And regarding the instructional methods, beyond the ability the "Gen V" equipment provides, the instructional methods are the one area here haven't necessarily evolved. DINFOS instruction could now be considered a Blended Learning Model, thanks to the new equipment. However, the schoolhouse still heavily relies on the traditional Direct Instructional and Cooperative Learning models. The bulk of my DINFOS education consisted of my instructor at the head of the class imparting their knowledge direction to me and my fellow students in the Direct Instructional Model. Towards the end of our classes, the method shifted to a Cooperative Learning Model with applied lessons. During this period of our classes, me and my fellow students participated in Field Training Exercises, conducted simulated press conferences, and produced and edited a complete base newspaper. However, this shouldn't be seen as a failure or a shortcoming. The challenges faced by the schoolhouse never pertained to the *methods* of their instruction, but rather the *content* of their courses. I was satisfied with the competency and professionalism of my instructors both times I attended DINFOS. My interviews with the two DINFOS students, Scheffler and Rust, also revealed their satisfaction with their instructors.

"I'm 1000% happy with the education I got, "Rust said

"The class was extremely worthwhile, it exceeded expectations," Scheffler said.

And while only in the first year of the Strategic Plan, the faculty and administration are thus far pleased with the results of the Strategic Plan and concur with their students' assessment.

"The schoolhouse is doing a good job," said Scalf.

"We're doing a bang-up job," said Huizinga.

Defining precisely what makes up a "Mission Capable Graduate" was at first a challenge. The term struck me as overly broad to the point where it would be impossible to define. However, after giving it more thought and reflecting on military journalism 's three core missions, the notion of what exactly a mission trained graduate is became more clear.

Military journalism has three pillars - Internal Communication, External Communication and Community Relations. Internal Communications is largely made-up of communicating *to* the troops the message from their leadership; it is a top-down communication structure. Referred to as Command Information, this portion of military journalism largely seeks to inform, explain, and motivate the intended audience which is internal.

So, to assess the proficiency of a "Mission Capable Graduate," one must look at a given graduate and gauge whether or not they are meeting their boss's needs. Having personal experience as a two-time DINFOS graduate, and again, through my interviews with recent two DINFOS students, I can state with confidence and authority that, *yes*, DINFOS is creating Mission Capable Graduates.

During my 16 years as an Air Force Public Affairs specialist, I produced print stories and still photos which won national level awards. In 2013 I deployed during the Global War on Terror as a solo asset to an air base in the Middle East and returned home with a glowing performance report and an unprecedented number one ranking from an active duty Air Force commander. In 2014 I was selected as the Air National Guard's "Photographer of the Year." Beyond the tactical skills, I also successfully communicated to the local media numerous times live on camera during Air Force events, and once during an in-flight emergency situation. Indeed, the definition of "Mission Capable."

As stated in the introduction, the specific portions of the Strategic Plan I focused my attention towards were:

- Value #2 (Innovation)
- Strategic Priority #2 (Mission-Capable Graduates)
- Line of Effort #2(Training & Education)
- Line of Effort #3 (Modernize & Expand)

To more closely examine these four points, I will begin with Value #2 (Innovation)

Value #2 (Innovation) states: "The willingness to adapt our curriculum, instructional methods and technologies to better meet the needs of commanders to compete and win in an increasingly complex information environment."

On two out of three of those above listed goals – curriculum, technologies - the schoolhouse is meeting the intent of Value #2.

Regarding the curriculum, the schoolhouse has added more training on digital media and social media than what was taught when I was at info student.

Regarding the technology, the Gen. V in-classroom equipment, the distance learning out of classroom class option, and the Pavilion website offerings, regarded as "DINFOS in a box," sufficiently satisfy the goal of adaptive technology as stated in Value #2.

Regarding the "instructional methods," this is the sole portion of Value #2 which hasn't innovated. However, I view this as an attribute, not a flaw. As discussed later, and in greater detail, in Findings Section of this paper, DINFOS employs the Direct Instructional and Cooperative Learning models. Dependable, familiar, and effective, these two teaching methods represent one aspect of the DINFOS learning experience which don't require an upgrade. Further, I would credit the schoolhouse for sticking with proven teaching methods rather than chasing trends at the expense of their students' education. As the saying goes "if it isn't broke don't fix it."

Strategic Priority #2 (Mission-Capable Graduates) pertains to the graduates, specifically "mission-capable graduates." It reads: "we will continually evolve our training strategy to prepare our graduates to communicate effectively in a dynamic information environment." Strategic Priority #2 is the essence of this entire project. The goal of this project research has been to determine if the schoolhouse is doing a good enough job teaching and preparing their students for the new media climate they are about to find themselves in.

After speaking with students Rust and Scheffler, the instructor Scalf and the practitioner Clapper, I conclude that DINFOS is meeting their intent of producing "mission-capable graduates." The students raved about their classes, the instructors speak well of the content they are teaching, and the practitioners are satisfied with the new troops' range of skills they've got after graduating from the schoolhouse.

Airman Rust concurs with that assessment. Her "1,000 percent" comment earlier in the project confirmed her contentment with her DINFOS education. "I got a two-year degree… in six months," she said while commenting on her DINFOS education. "I came out a better photographer too," she added.

While Scheffler attended a different DINFOS class than Rust, his sentiments towards DINFOS were similar in their praise and appreciation. "I gained lifelong skills; not just militarily, but day-to-day professional skills - public speaking, networking, writing and grammar," he said.

Air Force Senior Master Sergeant Craig Clapper of the D.C. Air National Guard's 113th Wing is the full-time Manager and Senior Enlisted Leader of the 113th's Public Affairs. Based at Joint Base Andrews just outside of Washington, D.C., he's been impressed his new troops fresh from DINFOS. "We've got someone at DINFOS right now," he said. They're going to learn four skills versus just one skill. It's good that they're learning more rather than not enough" `

Air Force Chief Master Sergeant Russ Scalf is the Directorate of Training NCO and Air Force Senior Enlisted Leader at DINFOS. In this role, he has overall oversight of the Air Force

portion of DINFOS education. From the teacher side of this equation, he's equally positive and optimistic. "We're doing a good job of exposing students to the things they could be exposed to in the field," he said.

Line of Effort Two's focus is Training & Education.

Line of Effort Two's *Goal Statement* is a proclamation to "continually evolve and adapt." Given the very existence of the FY 2023-FY 2028 Strategic Plan and it's detailed and in-depth content, together with the stated intent by administrators O'Shea and Wickman to regularly review the schoolhouse curriculum, I can authoritatively state that the schoolhouse is indeed evolving and adapting in a continuous fashion. "Every year, DINFOS reviews its course content," said Wickman.

"We asked 'what are the core set of skills?'" O'Shea said. "It was all driven by the recognition of the media environment."

LOE 2's *first Objective and Measure* spoke of "levering technology."

With regard to the technology, the schoolhouse is embracing and implementing the technology when it is structurally feasible and budgetarily allowable.

In the classroom, DINFOS has installed the Gen V in-classroom equipment. Also discussed further in the Findings portion of this paper, the Gen. V gear transforms the classroom space into an interconnected digital hub. "It's smart technology that lets instructors teach demonstrations from that screen, bring in guest to chat," said Scalf.

The Pavilion website, an online warehouse of schoolhouse teaching content, was built to offer students unable to attend DINFOS in-person, course materials they can utilize to learn at their discretion and timetable. Introduced in 2020, the Pavilion website features How To Lists, Instructional Articles, Checklists and other materials in written, audio and video formats. "It's a lot of CBTs, Computer-Based Training," said Clapper.

The option to attend a course remotely, as in the distance learning only MCF course, is certainly an instance of an institution levering technology to serve their students. Both times I attended DINFOS it was an in-person experience. Each time I attended DINFOS I was station there for more than three months. The classes were intense, demanding and allowed for little else other than the schoolwork. The notion that DINFOS now offers a class which a student could attend from the other side of the country or the other side of the globe, while at the same time allowing the student time to take care of their family, their mission or their deployment, is an advancement the schoolhouse should be proud of and which without question meets the intent of LOE 2's *first Objective and Measure* to leverage technology.

The stated goal of Line of Effort Three (Modernize & Expand) is to "modernize and expand capabilities."

Listed underneath this goal is LOE 3's first Objective and Measure, which seeks to "improve the use of training resources." Action Items listed underneath this Objective and Measure include "upgrading classroom capabilities" and "explore emerging technologies." As previously considered above in LOE 2's goal of "leveraging technology," the Gen V in-classroom equipment, the Pavilion website offerings and the remote-learning option are all woven together towards accomplishing LOE 3's first Objective and Measure. While the schoolhouse leverages technology (LOE 2), it simultaneously achieves the LOE 3 action items of "upgrading classroom capabilities" and "explore emerging technologies."

LOE 3's Expected Outcome states the goal of becoming a 'modern educational institution." Again, considering the three features listed above, there can be no doubt about DINFOS' status as a modern educational institution.

Discussion

Bottom line upfront, yes, DINFOS is adapting well to the changes in the media landscape. I base this conclusion a number of factors.

First, upon my evaluation and comparison of the three specific courses listed elsewhere in this project. The schoolhouse has added new material to class topics in an effort to stay current with industry demands.

The three DINFOS courses I examined more closely, *Mass Communications Foundations + 4 Writing*, *Mass Communications Foundations Course - 87 Days Version* and *Public Affairs & Communication Strategy Qualification Course (PACS-Q)* were the course most similar to the course I attended in 2005 and 2011.

In each case, these present-day courses differed from my previous classes in 2005 and 2011. MCF +4 was an online, distance only option, a variation that didn't exist in 2005. MCF 87 eliminated any lessons involving teaching design and editing skills needed to create a base newspaper while adding graphic design, photo and video skills, and social media management. PACS-Q's content similarly evolved, eliminating much of Waisbord's "industrial journalism" skills, turning their attention instead towards the digital and electronic skills Gilmore's "Tomorrow's Media."

I also conclude that DINFOS is adapting well based upon the extensive interviews I conducted with former DINFOS students, current instructors, faculty, and administrators, and a current military Public Affairs manager who hires and works with graduates of the DINFOS program. The interviews provided further understanding of the situation from all perspectives. From the academics and administrators who developed the curriculum, to the students who learned that curriculum, to the practitioners in the field who then employed those students. From top to bottom, front to back, I interviewed individuals involved at every stage, every level, of this process. They all offered insights and a voice to the organization's recognition, plan, and efforts towards their goal of creating "mission-capable graduates" (Gilmore, 2016).

At the schoolhouse I interviewed DINFOS Provost Mary O'Shea and former DINFOS Deputy Commandant, Air Force Colonel Tony Wickman. In classroom I interviewed DINFOS Instructors Mary Huizinga and Air Force Senior Master Sergeant Russ Scalf. Also, in the classroom I interviewed DINFOS students Air Force Airman 1st Class Tylin Rust and Army Lieutenant Jake Scheffler.

Interviews were conducted via email, phone, and video conversations, and in person. These interviews were journalistic in nature, meaning they are meant to gather qualitative information and expertise-based feedback rather than quantitive data for formal analysis. As such, they do not require IRB Human Subjects approval. These interviews were conducted to help document how and why DINFOS developed its FY 2023-FY 2028 Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan puts into writing schoolhouse's intent to modernize their curriculum and lays out a multi-point plan for doing so. The interviews also helped illustrated specifics on how these modernization efforts are being implemented in the classroom.

Air Force Col. Tony Wickman, Commander - Air Force Public Affairs Agency, was the DINFOS Deputy Commander from 2016 to 2018. He played a key role in crafting the updated curriculum. "We've always tried to evolve," he said when referring to the schoolhouse's most recent curriculum re-write. The curriculum review process began in 2017 when the schoolhouse, facing budget pressures, questioned if it would make more sense to handover its mission to a more cost-efficient organization. "It was, and is, a Budget constrained environment," Wickman said. "Should we still do it at DINFOS, or outsource it?" It was at that point DINFOS began the process of re-examining their course offerings.

"We (DINFOS) were like a family farm; generation after generation, eventually you run out of land, you're no longer cost efficient," said DINFOS Provost Mary O'Shea. As Provost, O'Shea supports the Public Affairs Training and Education Council (PATEC), policy, accreditation, and program evaluation. She also oversees the Schoolhouse's strategic initiatives, curricula development.

"The money will only get tighter, so the challenge is to make sure that everyone understands how they contribute to the fight," said Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Russ Scalf – DINFOS' Air Force Senior Enlisted Leader. "The schoolhouse has to be able to adapt quickly in a career field and fight that evolves on a daily basis," he added. "The courses themselves go through set periodic reviews to ensure we're meeting the needs of today's journalism environment."

With that in mind, hard choices were made, and certain courses were cut from the catalog. The Senior Public Affairs Course taught mid-grade officers and senior enlisted troops was eliminated. "There were not enough teachers to teach all of it," Wickman said.

"Several courses were looked at and merged, to create the Mass Communications Foundation course several existing courses (9) were merged."

"The Joint Intermediate Public Affairs Course (JIPAC), Joint Contingency Public Affairs Course (JCPAC), and the Intermediate Public Affairs Specialist Course (IPASC) have all been recently designed/redesigned to reflect today's challenges," said Scalf. "If I were king for a day, I would cannibalize them to create one course with three teams. I think it would be more efficient and we could train more annual students that way."

Also, in a schoolhouse-specific feature, DINFOS also taught courses referred to as "service specific," that is, courses just for Marines, courses just for Sailors, courses just for Soldiers and so on and so on. These courses were also cut in the name of efficiency.

"It was a nightmare keeping up with the service specific courses," said O'Shea. "There were nine separate service specific courses."

"The field is changing so rapidly, they don't know what they want either," said Patricia Huizinga, Department Head, Mass Communication Foundations (Franklin, 2014).

And while Wickman may not be a fan of the cutbacks, he's an economic realist, "We have to accept we have constraints placed upon us," he said.

That said, when designing the new course, the administration did listen to what the Marines, Sailors and Soldiers had say. "The Navy wants more Media Literacy-style classes, but the Army – doesn't want that, the Army won't let the Soldiers don't go near" social media," Scalf said.

To the point, yes, I conclude with authority that DINFOS *is* aware of the situation and they're making a concerted effort towards dealing with the situation.

Additionally, based upon to my extensive review of the DINFOS Strategic Plan, I conclude that DINFOS is well recognizing and responding to the upheaval in the media landscape. (Franklin, 2014).

The plan, an examination of the schoolhouse's present situation, also includes a forward-looking and multi-step map to towards the future. Comprehensive and well-constructed, the plan includes considerations for the schoolhouse's curriculum, content, equipment, students, and faculty period.

The portions of the plan I found most applicable to this project are: 1) Value #2 (Innovation), 2) Strategic Priority #2 (Mission-Capable Graduates), 3) Line of Effort Two (Training & Education) and 4) Line of Effort Three (Modernize & Expand).

As referenced extensively in the Methods section of this project, these four points pertain to the students, the training and education the students receive, the equipment and type of instruction presented to the students, and the long-term intent to keep current and build upon this overall endeavor (Kirchhoff, 2022).

Value #2 (Innovation) is embodied by the in-classroom Gen. V equipment., rhe Pavilion online teaching resource and by the schoolhouse's dedicated endeavor to adapt, adjust, to evolve their teachings so that their students are prepared for whatever sitation they'll face out in the field (Franklin, 2014).

Strategic Priority #2 (Mission-Capable Graduates) is essentially the *What* of this situation. All efforts regarding equipment, tactics long term strategy are geared towards this end result of Mission-Capable Graduates.

Following this line of thinking, Line of Effort Two (Training & Education) then is the *how* of this situation. The schoolhouse is committed to delivering the best training and education they can. They do this by continuously reviewing and reworking the content they teach. This can be accomplished by either *adding* or *deleting* specific lesson plans. Complimentary to the course content, the course *equipment* is also a factor and the schoolhouse has made equipment upgrades in support of Strategic Priority #2 as evidenced by Gen. V and Pavilion.

Lastly, Line of Effort Three (Modernize & Expand) is also the *How*, but also the *Why* of this situation. With the aforementioned in classroom equipment, the online resources, the updated course content, and the overall schoolhouse's mission codified in the Strategic Plan, LOE #3 supports Strategic Priority #2.

And lastly, based upon my own experiences as a DINFOS student and military journalist, a timeframe covering nearly two decades, I can conclude that DINFOS is adapting well to the changes in the media landscape and producing mission-capable graduates.

My experience as a DINFOS student reveals just how much the media and journalism industry has changed. I distinctly recall a moment at DINFOS in 2005 when we were all gathered in the large DINFOS classroom, which had the video projector, and we were watching live MSNBC coverage of the announcement of the new pope. Whereas today's schoolhouse has the Gen. V interactive classroom equipment as standard, back then in 2005 only *one* classroom, the main large classroom, had even a fraction of that capability. To compare then versus now, if such a breaking news story of that magnitude occurred today, we'd all be in our own classrooms using the Gen. V gear to livestream the news rather than having to gather together in the one place with the required capability and equipment. Also, since it's 2023, we'd all also likely be glued to our cell phones, monitoring the news updates on Tik Tok, X, Instagram, Snapchat, or whichever app is preferred by the younger troops. It's also very possible the younger troops wouldn't even bother paying attention to the live TV coverage. A recent Pew Research Center report confirms the growing dominance of the app Tik Tok as the preferred news source for younger Americans. Since 2020, the percentage of 18–24-year-olds who get their news from Tik Tok has rocketed up from 9% to 32%. (Masta, 2023).

Conclusion

At the conclusion of this project, after the interviews after the syllabi, after the strategic plan, after the literature and research, the most significant findings are encouraging. The schoolhouse is aware of the issues, they've got a plan, and they are moving forward with the plan.

From top to bottom, the administrators, the instructors, and the students, all thus far are satisfied with the level of instruction. And while those in the field take issue with the military journalist trying to do too many things at once, there aren't any complaints regarding the mission capability standards of the new graduates. (Clapper, 2023)

The limitations of this project that concern measures of quality and quantity. More students could have been interviewed, more time could certainly have been devoted to the project, and an in person visit to the schoolhouse may have proven valuable. However, as the saying goes, "you go to war with the army you have" (Sonnenfeldt, 2004.) Beyond the production-related limitations of this project, a broader view of the schoolhouse courses could have been conducted, and a more in-depth review of current industry practices could have been conducted to gauge whether or not DINFOS is keeping up with real time industry practices.

Following that line of thought, future research for this project would include focusing specifically on real time on air, in the app, on social media tools techniques and practices, and once those items have been identified, those items become the new benchmarks, the new goals towards which the schoolhouse points towards.

Appendix A: Full list of interview questions

1. What specifically prompted the creation of the '23-28 DINFOS Strategic Plan?

2. RE: specific tactical skills (digital, social media) how has the DINFOS Course Catalogue been updated to meet the needs of today's Journalism environment?

3. Have any training courses been merged with other training courses?
   a. If yes… why?

4. Did DINFOS add any new courses in the face of today's Journalism environment?

5. Did DINFOS discontinue any new courses in the face of today's Journalism environment?

6. Air Force-specific question – Why did Air Force Public Affairs create the new AFSC, X6?

7. What does DINFOS Leadership view as the greatest three challenges facing the next generation of DTKs?

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