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Veterans and the Media:

A pilot survey report on how UK veterans perceive media representations about military and post-military experiences

By Jenna Pitchford-Hyde (University of East Anglia) and Katy Parry (University of Leeds)

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Executive Summary

This report introduces the findings of our pilot survey on veterans' perceptions on media representations of military and post-military experiences. The mainstream media is thought to play a key role in shaping public attitudes, which in turn affects how policy makers, charities and military advocacy groups work with the media. Our objective is to work with veterans to find out what they think the main issues are in contemporary media representations. The findings of the project will be used to offer guidance to British media organisations for a better-informed representation of military veterans.

This report provides a brief context for the research and outlines some of the key themes that have emerged from our survey. It addresses the leading impressions and concerns raised by veterans, identifies the dominant perceived patterns of representation across varied media genres, and investigates how our respondents feel about issues such as disability, mental health, ethnicity, and gender in veteran portrayals.

Crucially, the survey begins to explore the ways in which veterans believe media representations could be improved, and this will form a starting point for the recommendations we make to media organisations as part of our further research.

This report presents:

- A sense of how veterans see themselves represented in the British media based on an online survey completed by 96 respondents in June 2020.
- A brief overview of the main issues, concerns, and challenges that veterans identified when thinking about media representations.
- Veteran feedback on the pilot study which will play an essential role in the design of our further research.
- Potential avenues of investigation as we develop the research project.

Veterans and the Media: A pilot survey report on how UK veterans perceive media representations about military and post-military experiences

Introduction

This report is written for a general audience with the aim of providing a concise summary of our findings from the 'Veterans and the Media' online survey conducted in June 2020. Hyperlinks and references are provided for those who would like to follow up with further research in this area.

The report is written by Dr Jenna Pitchford-Hyde (University of East Anglia) and Dr Katy Parry (University of Leeds) who are researchers with a shared interest in how military and veteran experience is portrayed across the media.

This project is interested in how veterans feel about the ways in which they are being represented in the media.[1] With the mainstream media playing such an important part in shaping public perceptions, our objective is to work with veterans to find out what they think the main issues are in contemporary media representations. The findings of the project will be used to offer guidance to British media organisations for a better-informed representation of military veterans.

We should add here that we recognise that 'veteran' is itself a problematic term for some ex-forces personnel and not necessarily how they would self-define: in Burdett et al's study (2013) only half of all veterans in the ex-Service group described themselves as 'veterans'. With our interest in perceptions, we are alert to how word choices bring certain connotations with them, but for the wider public and policy definition, this is the most recognisable term. So, whilst we use 'veteran' here, we are very open to questioning and problematising this term in our conversations with the military community and as the research develops further.

Research Context

This section provides some context for the current study regarding research about veterans and the media.

Veterans have featured prominently in the British media in recent years. Ex-forces characters have appeared in dramas such as *Bodyguard* (BBC) and *Coronation Street* (ITV), whilst real life veterans have competed in reality talent shows such as Lance Corporal Cassidy Little on *The People's Strictly* (BBC). Coverage of sporting events such as the Paralympics and Invictus Games have showcased the challenges for, and achievements of, veterans experiencing physical and emotional trauma. Fictional portrayals of the war veteran, alongside reality TV shows which test the resilience of contributors, can offer a more personalised and emotionally charged representation than news reports. The war

[1] In the UK a military veteran is defined as anyone who has served for at least one day in Her Majesty's Armed Forces (Regular or Reserve) or Merchant Mariners who have seen duty on legally defined military operations. A veteran is therefore not defined by the length, nature of their service, or when they left. They also remain veterans even if discharged from the forces for a serious or criminal breach of the 1955 Army Act. The UK therefore has a very inclusive definition (see Burdett et al 2013; UK Government Veterans Factsheet 2020)

veteran often cuts a tragic figure in dramatic depictions: embittered, alcoholic, injured, traumatised; and in reality TV, the tropes can be just as crudely described as: overcoming adversity, successful transition, physical and emotional resilience in the face of extreme challenges. While the increased visibility of veterans is potentially a positive step forward, it does raise further questions around how media producers portray veterans.

Contemporary veteran representation in the media also must be considered in the context of the 'war on terror' era and specifically the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The intense media coverage of UK involvement in these recent wars, and the growing questioning of the wars in public opinion, meant that the portrayal of UK soldiers and veterans of the so-called '9/11 wars' became politically fraught.

Since General Sir Richard Dannatt, former Head of the British Army, identified a perceived 'gulf' between the Army and 'the nation' in September 2007, the notion of reconciliation between the public and the forces, and how ex-military personnel can make a 'successful transition', have attracted both public funding and critical scholarly attention. Scholarly interest was sparked by the noticeable efforts of UK military, state institutions and civil society groups to repair the apparent 'gulf' between military and civilian populations following the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Dannatt 2007). One area of research was in the culturally contested figure of the soldier or veteran in media, theatrical productions, museum displays, novels and memoirs (Cree and Caddick 2019; Danilova and Purnell 2019; Kelly 2013; Pitchford-Hyde 2017; Webber and Long 2014).

Alongside images of Second World War veterans and those who served in intervening conflicts such as the Falklands war or in Northern Ireland, the recent war veteran has become a familiar trope or character in both factual and fictional portrayals. In their work on US newspaper depictions of veterans, Kleykamp and Hipes (2015) point to concerns about veterans stereotypically portrayed as **'heroes', 'perpetrators'** or **'victims'**. Kleykamp and Hipes' study of articles from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* (2003 to 2011) finds that the news media frames veterans as damaged by their service but deserving of government benefits and social assistance. Whilst a focus on the moral, mental or physical injuries carried by veterans could have the positive effect of raising awareness of conditions such as PTSD and depression, critics of the 'veteran-as-victim' narrative argue that it displaces 'alternative framings of veterans as successful and resilient' (Kleycamp and Hipes 2015). The above study focuses on news reports in the US, and whilst the political and military elite debate in the UK echoes this concern for negativity, there is also a lack of empirical evidence to support the claim that harmful depictions outweigh more supportive or positive stories (Woodward et al 2009; Caddick et al 2020). Only a few studies have asked veterans, or others in the military community, what they think about such portrayals (Cree 2020; Parry & Thumim 2017; Schmidt 2020).

Our survey focused on veteran perceptions of the media, but we are also keen to examine further the media representations themselves, to better understand where and how such portrayals endure. Some questions for further research could be:

- How is contemporary military culture imagined in media representations and how are obstacles to wellbeing, family life and societal integration depicted in the transition from military to post-military life?
- What do the identified patterns of portrayal reveal about the popular media's role in shaping public discourses of resilience, rehabilitation and reconciliation of armed forces personnel, as they adjust to their post-military identities?

We now turn to the survey design and findings.

Methods

The online survey was designed and accessed using Survey Monkey. We provided information on the 'Veterans and the Media' website and in the information sheets and consent forms for participants. The survey underwent ethical review at UEA (ref: GREC 18-1434). We recruited survey participants mostly through Twitter in the month of June 2020 (5th-30th June), by asking for retweets and promotion from the Veterans & Families Research Hub, as well as veteran breakfast clubs, charities and support groups. This means that we cannot claim that the survey is representative of the full demographic of UK veterans (see below and the Findings sections for more details). But the survey was designed to attract opinions from a range of veterans, and to get a sense of how they feel about media portrayals. The survey uses lots of open questions and our approach follows a qualitative mindset in the sense that it is interested in analysing thematic patterns, forms of expression, and intensity of feeling across the range of answers, as well as finding meaningful avenues for future research.

In total, 96 respondents signed the consent form and completed the survey. It is important to acknowledge that our method of recruitment via Twitter for this survey has two significant limitations. The first is that we cannot confirm the veteran identity of participants due to respondents being self-selecting. However, analysis of the responses indicate that all participants appeared to take the survey seriously with no indication of sabotage-style or fake answers. The second limitation is that we recognise that the survey cannot be demographically representative or used to make generalised assumptions across the UK veteran population. The fact that respondents were recruited via Twitter naturally may skew the demographic of participants and this should be borne in mind when analysing these results. However, what the survey has done very effectively is to begin to provide veterans with an opportunity to have their say about how they see themselves represented on British television and to highlight some key concerns which we can focus on as our research develops. The planned Veterans and the Media Project aims to actively involve veterans in the design of the research project from the outset so we will be responding to the issues raised in the pilot survey as we move forward.

We provide details of the questions we asked in the following Findings section, and Appendix 1 includes the full survey.

Findings

Introduction: Who took part in the survey and what demographic patterns can we see emerging?

Age

There were respondents from most age ranges with just a few under 40s, most situated in the 40-69 age range, then falling again in the 70s, with 1 respondent in their 80s.

Age	Percentage of Participants (Actual number)
18-24	0%
25-29	1.04% (1)
30-39	5.21% (5)
40-49	22.92% (22)
50-59	32.29% (31)
60-69	27.08% (26)
70-79	10.42% (10)
80-89	1.04% (1)
90-99	0%
100+	0%

Gender

There was a gender mix of 73% (69) male and 27% (26) female. We were keen to include female voices, which are often marginalised in the military community, and so we promoted the survey through groups such as @SaluteHer.

Ethnicity

In terms of ethnicity, the respondents almost exclusively identified as white or Caucasian. One respondent categorised themselves as 'White British, with Irish gypsy heritage'. Respondents were not provided with a set of defined response, but rather asked to describe their own ethnicity. Some indicated 'British', 'English' and others supplied playful answers such as 'not relevant', 'veterans are colour blind', 'Soldier', 'Just me', or 'I wouldn't [define my ethnicity]'. As far as we can tell, we had no responses from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) veterans and we are looking at how our recruitment methods could be altered in future parts of the project to address this lack of representation. We should also perhaps use the standard ethnicity categories in future research, although the non-conformist answers above provide interesting insights into self-professed identity markers.

Area of Service

Army (including the Women's Royal Army Corps, Parachute Regiment, Royal Signals, Royal Army Dental Corps, Royal Engineers, Medical Services): 72 (75%)

Royal Navy (including Royal Marines, and Women's Royal Naval Service): 13 (13.5%)

Royal Air Force: 13 (13.5%)

The survey respondents are representative of a mix of different military forces. The various branches of the Army were very strongly represented with 72 in total and a fairly high proportion from the Women's Royal Army Corps (10 respondents). The branches of the Royal Navy made up 13 of the

participants with the remaining 13 from the Royal Air Force. Two of the respondents had served in both the Army and RAF so both of these terms of service have been counted. As such, the percentages in brackets do not add up to 100.

The high number of respondents from certain forces could be indicative of the willingness of certain military groups and organisations to promote the survey on Twitter. The larger proportion with an Army background also reflects its greater size overall – the Army has always had more personnel than the other services, although this number does slightly over-represent them in the survey.[2]

What are the predominant impressions of veterans expressed in our survey when it comes to the media representations of veterans that they recall?

It is worth noting that some of the programmes mentioned by our respondents focused on military life itself, so not all participants differentiated between representations of active service and veterans. Interestingly, there was a good spread of programmes from different periods. Contemporary shows are easier to recall, perhaps, but programmes such as *Dad's Army* and *Soldier, Soldier* also featured. The fact that these shows still come to mind for the participants indicates the level of enduring impact that televised depictions can make, emphasising the importance of the questions this study hopes to pursue further. It might also reveal interesting generational differences between the respondents.

We asked our participants what kinds of words and phrases they had seen used frequently in the media to describe veterans and the most frequently mentioned included: 'Neglected, Forgotten, Abandoned, Positive, Humbling' and 'Aggressive, Violent, Unstable, PTSD, Substance Abuse.' This list is indicative of the mix of responses our participants provided. The aggregate response was that most representations in British television programmes are negative. However, the veterans were keen to praise what they saw as examples of positive representation and good practice. Importantly, there were a number of differences and contradictions across the responses, especially when it came to PTSD: for some, there was too much focus on it, but others argued for more focus on representations of PTSD in order to de-stigmatise it.

As previous studies have found, there was an expressed concern about binary narratives – the broken veteran versus the inspirational hero:

Helpless, broken, or dangerous

The images that were most prominent for our participants was the frequent portrayal of veterans as helpless, broken, or dangerous: 'mostly Veterans are portrayed as mad, dangerous losers with nothing to live for to offer society, which I think is disgusting as 99% of Veterans are peaceful people.' The majority of participants found the representations of veterans to be largely negative. One respondent summarised their overall impression of how veterans are represented: 'Generally I find that military are projected as obstinate, law unto themselves, awkward', with others observing that veterans are often seen as living outside of, or separate from, society.

[2] UK Defence Personnel Statistics, July 2020: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7930/

Hero and 'overcoming' narratives

Whilst many participants viewed the representations as negative, some suggested that the media often focused on the "hero" and inspirational narratives because the public would not want to see the reality of the effects of combat: 'would society want to see the tragedy of wars or just Olympians and fund raisers?' Indeed, our participants indicated that most of the more positive representations are found in coverage of sports events, describing the Invictus Games as a 'fantastic representation of military personnel overcoming adversity.'

How are different media genres discussed?

The responses to the survey acknowledged some fairly significant differences in terms of how different genres of television media approach the representation of veterans. Whilst there are positive and negative examples spread across most of the genres, there appears to be a consensus amongst the participants that certain genres lend themselves better to positive representations, with others falling into predictable stereotyping of veterans, which the participants find disappointing and upsetting. Sports coverage and documentaries depicting veterans undertaking physical challenges are seen as largely positive, depicting images of veterans 'supporting, teammates, working together, pushing themselves'. Below, we focus on the media genres cited most often.

News media

Many of the respondents were fairly scathing about the news media with the prevailing feeling that veterans were often portrayed in a negative light, framing them as dangerous or broken: 'I'm talking about the news here. The British media tend to follow the same track as US media of "veterans" as broken and in need of help.'

Several participants cited the coverage of Remembrance Day services as generally positive in their representation of veterans, but observed that the focus remained largely on the veterans of World War II which was not necessarily representative of the UK's veteran population.

For context, it is important to acknowledge that the survey was conducted in June 2020 and there is a sense in the responses that recently (during the Covid-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests), stories featuring veterans had been politically framed when this was not always appropriate or relevant: '[in the] news… we are called far right thugs and constantly painted negatively.' Our participants voiced strong concerns about the repeated framing of PTSD as the root of dangerous behaviour: 'every terrorist attack the BBC, itv, Sky News, always run reports that the poor murdering terrorist had ptsd... Not one veteran has committed an act of terror or would they even have that mind set.' The perception is that the news media 'add unwanted stigma to PTSD, you associate mass killings and terrorism to ptsd, its total nonsense and they [know] it.'

Magazine Programmes

The importance of visibility and representation of veterans in prime time magazine shows was raised by some participants with magazine programmes such as *The One Show* receiving praise for featuring positive veteran role models: 'JJ Chalmers is a great rep'. With viewing figures in the millions, shows such as this potentially play an important role in shaping public perceptions of veterans.

Drama and soap operas

Television dramas and soap operas are some of the most frequently referenced genres and overwhelmingly received as negative or inaccurate in their portrayal of veterans. The 1990s drama *Soldier, Soldier* was mentioned twice as a positive example of a fairly 'realistic' and 'believable' representation. However, it was also seen as a presenting a negative stereotype of soldiers as 'uneducated' and alcoholics. *Strike*'s normalised portrayal of a veteran's status as incidental was well received, with the observation that the show 'mentioned him being a Vet but didn't play on it.' Despite its noted incidental portrayal, *Strike* was a frequently mentioned drama among our respondents.

Besides the question of accuracy of the depictions, there were two main concerns that participants expressed about fictional portrayals, which we have already alluded to above: 1. Veterans as dangerous ('classic caricature seems to be drunk, aggressive, mad') or; 2. Veterans as 'broken' (suffering from mental health issues such as PTSD and unable to fit into society). Our participants felt that old stereotypes of 'the damaged military type', and especially those with mental health issues, are often used as convenient 'baddies' in drama (especially crime drama such as *Vera* and *Silent Witness*) or 'thugs' (*Our Girl*). Our participants were most concerned about the impression that this painted of veterans for the general public:

> 'Not sure of name, BBC again I think. Lad was being fitted up for killing a Taliban terrorist, then the TV drama saw him fitted up for an abduction of a lawyer, made to look like he killed her. Again, although it's a TV drama you are making out veterans are dangerous murderers roaming the streets which couldn't be further from the truth.' (Referring to *The Capture,* BBC 1, 2019)

One participant highlights how in *Sherlock*, Watson was 'broken' from his service, noting that it 'would be nicer if his service is an asset to his life' and that such stereotypes reinforce the idea 'that all Vets are damaged goods.' There is a sense that dramas give 'the impression all veterans suffer from PTSD' and are subsequently represented as unbalanced and volatile (*Coronation Street*, *Eastenders*, *Bodyguard*) or in 'need of help', thus creating a 'negative impression' (*Silent Witness*).

Comments on *Bodyguard* (BBC) summed up the difficulty that drama writers face in presenting a balanced or fair portrayal: 'It showed a veteran as I believe we all want to be seen - capable, strong, mentally resilient. But also showed the hardships we can face with mental health, lack of direction Etc' (*Bodyguard*).

Sport

On the whole, sports programmes and documentaries were perceived more favourably than other genres. The Invictus Games were seen by many veterans as portraying veterans 'in a really positive light', but others highlighted such representations can also have a negative effect on public perceptions: 'We see far more disabled sport involving vets. It's fantastic for those who attend, but perception of 'broken' service personnel is perpetuated.'

Documentaries

In general documentaries were viewed positively. One of our respondents had been involved in *Without Limits: Australia* and was very satisfied with how she and her fellow veterans had been represented: 'I may be biased but I felt this show showed what us veterans go through on a daily basis with pain/mental health illnesses. It normalised the 'stigma' around it and got the point across.'

Some respondents, however, felt that although documentaries offered a more positive representation that television dramas, there was still an element of dramatising rather than attempting to represent the real life experiences of veterans:

> 'much of the documentaries can be very 'sob-story' though. There's not much real life truth to the representation. Everything is either completely glamorised, traumatised or catastrophised and people assume that's real life.'

Investigative documentary *Panorama* was strongly criticised for its episode on troops in Afghanistan: '*Panorama* episode on Afghanistan slighted the military with hearsay evidence giving the impression soldiers operated as death squads.'

Reality Television

Reality show *DIY SOS* was mentioned several times as a show which intended a positive representation, but reinforced stereotypes about veterans as broken: 'I dislike shows such as *DIY SOS* which always show veterans in need of help. Yet again, the 'broken veteran' concept which is inaccurate. Only a small number of veterans struggle.'

Several veterans mentioned *SAS Who Dares Wins* as a very positive example. It was perceived as capturing 'the strength courage and commitment needed to be a soldier.' The emphasis on strength seemed to be positively received, with another veteran commenting that, 'both Ant and Foxy apparently suffer with PTSD, yet you'd never guess as they put on a show for viewers that make the non Special Forces arm of the Armed forces look weak.'

However, one of our respondents voiced concerns about portraying an overly "macho" image which they felt could be damaging: 'the whole celebrity macho competitive vibe is negative and very stereotypical, which we need to get away from. In the past fly on the wall documentaries like 'perisher' or 'submarine school's had a very similar effect'. This participant went on to explain that more emphasis should be placed on keeping representations more factual rather than glorifying certain traits: 'I was involved myself in a documentary which filmed us doing EOD training, that was a pretty factual show, it was good but it was Channel 5 so very few people watched it.'

How are issues around disability, mental health, ethnicity and gender approached by those in the survey?

Disability and Mental Health

There was considerable variation in the way that depictions of veteran disability and mental health have been received by our participants, with some saying that there is far too much focus on PTSD and negative connotations, whilst others suggested there should be more coverage of mental health issues in order to de-stigmatise them and highlight examples of good practice. There is a sense amongst some of our participants that disabled veterans and those living with disabilities and/or PTSD (and other mental health issues) are only represented in scenarios in which they are showcased as "overcoming" adversity (with the majority shown in the sporting contexts of the Invictus Games or Paralympics). Whilst there was a sense that physical disabilities and mental health issues reinforced negative stereotypes (especially in dramas and soaps), some veterans felt that documentaries and reality shows (*Without Limits: Australia* and *DIY SOS: The Big Build*) provided an important platform for raising awareness about the gaps in governmental support for veterans.

Ethnicity

When asked 'Were any of the veterans from Black or minority ethnic groups and did you feel this impacted on the way in which they were portrayed?', none of our participants suggested that BAME veterans were particularly well represented. Our participants gave responses that fell into two groups of opinion: that BAME veterans are under-represented; and that the military doesn't see colour. Whilst all of the respondents were keen to stress that all soldiers and veterans are treated equally by the military, it is important to note that discourse which disregards ethnicity also runs the risk of diminishing the experiences of BAME veterans. Since none of our respondents to the survey identified as Black, Asian or another ethnic minority, we must be mindful that these responses capture the experiences and perceptions of predominantly white veterans, and this is something we are planning to address in the future components of the project.

Gender

The central points highlighted in terms of gender were the under-representation of women veterans and the misrepresentation or unrealistic depiction of their experiences. They noted that most of the women veterans represented in the media are those who participated in World War II rather than more recent conflicts. They observed that 'very rarely are female vets shown' and when they are, the depictions play into particular stereotypes of the military woman as 'opinionated' and 'hardened', or as romantic interests of male characters. Some of our female participants also identified the image of veterans as 'masculine' as marginalising or inaccurate: 'I object to the idea that a veteran is a masculine thing. That's another stereotype/cliche in dramas and news. What about the many female veterans?'

What are the main concerns expressed about media representations?

Inaccuracies/unrealistic scenarios

Our participants were frustrated by the apparent lack of research in some of the shows. The BBC Three drama *Our Girl* was seen as 'very inaccurate, sometimes laughably so.' Our respondents observed that 'the love affair would not happen' and that the programme misrepresented the reality of being in the military: 'She would never have answered back the way she did. The unit would not have been acting like they did.' There was also concern about the lack of research involved: 'Emmerdale had the Veteran as a combat Veteran when he was an Army chef, they don't see combat as they are REMFs'. One participant noted the lack of representation of non-frontline military veterans: 'veterans in dramas are almost always ex paras or similar, rarely clerks, store men or drivers.' These comments point to the persistent focus on combat or infantry roles when dramas feature military veterans.

Overuse of stereotypes

The overuse of the dangerous or broken stereotypes emerged as one of the key concerns of veterans with many indicating that veterans are repeatedly depicted as 'mad, bad or sad' (see above).

What do respondents suggest could be improved about media representation of veterans?

Whilst this pilot study is the first step in a much larger project, our participants have raised some interesting questions for us to consider as we move forward. One asked: 'I feel that you feel that veterans watch programmes about veterans...you need to ask yourself just how many do?' which indeed raises some interesting questions for future research. How many veterans actually watch programmes about veterans and, crucially, what are the factors that may encourage or deter them in doing so?

For some of our participants, the ways in which issues affecting veterans were approached by the media producers were the deciding factor in whether they engaged with the programmes or not:

> 'Coronation Street many years ago ran a story with ptsd. Had to switch off as it belittled the subject, the research wasn't enough.'

> 'I rarely watch TV with veterans on as it can trigger unwanted memories. However there should be more on PTSD to raise awareness. Many of us do not talk about our horrors, our families do not know what's going on inside our heads, we'd like to tell them but it's to hard.. Living each day is the hardest.. More awareness equals more support and understanding. I read a book called Broken by War, a British author who explains ptsd after going through so much himself, its these stories that should made into programs.'

Potential Impact of the Project

Additionally, we were able to ascertain the level of interest from veterans in the necessity and relevance of such a project. The overwhelming response was that this is a necessary and long overdue intervention with veterans tweeting their interest in and support for the project:

'Looks like a positive investigation of a real problem.' Twitter, 6th June 2020

'So so important that veterans voices are heard.' Twitter, 10th June 2020

'Very interesting & relevant research & there must be many of our military veteran followers with a viewpoint on this topic so, get involved!', Twitter, 16th June 2020

'This'll be an interesting one. Always fascinated by how media portrayals change tone over the years (and in different countries). And it matters how people with particular, unique experiences are shown. In this case, perhaps tendencies sometimes to amplify the very best and worst.' Twitter, 18th June 2020

'Interesting project - we look forward to reading the findings of this project in the future and discovering what people think about TV portrayals of veteran.' Twitter, 22nd June 2020.

'Got to be worth contributing and hopefully shifting the tired, old stereotypes of service personnel...' Twitter, 30th June 2020

Many other veterans e-mailed us or left their contact details on the survey to indicate they would like to participate further in the project as it progresses, again indicating a significant amount of interest. We have also been contacted by veteran artists, veteran participants in television

programmes, screen writers, and journalists who are keen to be involved with the project and have expressed interest in its findings.

Conclusions and future research

We recognise that the survey cannot be demographically representative or generalisable to the UK veteran population due to the nature of our recruitment via Twitter. However, the survey did collect responses from 96 people over a period of a month, which demonstrates enthusiasm for veterans to participate in such a survey. Comments on Twitter also reflected how pleased they were at being asked for their perspective – a critique they have of media producers in general. This is also reflected in the numbers who indicated interest in future research participation. **So how can we take our observations from the survey forward?**

Over the course of the pilot study, our participants have already indicated several ways in which they believe media representations of veterans could be improved which we will take forward as we develop the larger project.

1. Increased research and consultation with veterans.
2. Avoiding harmful stereotypes (for example, depiction of veterans as dangerous or broken).
3. A more nuanced approach to representing veterans with PTSD.
4. A better balance between highlighting important issues that veterans are dealing with, and showing the 'ordinariness' of post-service life for many veterans.

One aim of any future research will be to deliver feasible recommendations to the appropriate bodies about how to improve veteran representations in a way that is responsive to the identified concerns of different groups. There are several potential contentious areas where better understanding could be pursued through further research:

Military service is not just about combat: There are important distinctions to be made about the veteran experience in relation to combat and non-combat roles. 'Combat stress' and 'PTSD' are recurrent features of veteran media portrayals, but this places a focus on infantry roles and 'battle-scarring', but for many veterans this is a distortion which misrepresents and mischaracterises military service.

Reporting of military and veteran suicides: Once the survey had closed, the reporting in July 2020 of the suicides of three young serving soldiers brought the issue of Army welfare failures again into public discussion. The *Sunday People*'s Save Our Soldiers campaign is just the latest of a number of campaigns by UK newspapers calling for an overhaul of how the MoD tackles PTSD and other mental health issues. The *Sunday Times* campaign in 2018 credited its own Save Our Soldiers campaign with the move by the MoD to record the number of suicides among military veterans. The establishment of the Office for Veterans' Affairs within the Cabinet Office in July 2019 has consolidated information on and support for UK veterans. The current Minister for Defence People and Veterans, Johnny Mercer, recently announced the UK 2021 census will include a question about veteran status for the first time. This move should allow for much more accurate recording of veteran welfare in the future, and a better understanding of needs.

News reporting of serving military or veteran suicides is a matter for contention within the military community, and press coverage and campaigns are often criticised for over-emphasising a military-related crisis in (predominantly male) mental health. Distraught families are reported as feeling abandoned by the MoD, placing their personal loss in tension with others in the military hierarchy and community who worry about the reputational damage engendered by such events and their coverage. A perception of unfairness and misrepresentation undergird the bad feeling towards the press, but is such defensiveness warranted? Contrasting statistics are presented to make the case either that military and veteran suicides are more prevalent than in the general population, or alternatively, that they simply mirror the numbers in the civilian population. One future area of research could examine such coverage in detail, compare data and fact-check the claims made. Research into suicide reporting generally could also be integrated into the study and subsequent recommendations, to remind media outlets of their responsibilities when reporting on such events.[3] Improved data on UK veteran status (following the 2021 census) will enhance reliability and aid future research in this area.

Veterans in the criminal justice system: Similar to mental health and suicide reporting which is thought to reinforce a stereotype of ex-forces personnel 'broken' by their military service, news reporting on veterans as perpetrators of crime (especially violent crime) is an area of contention. Rather than harming themselves, the message here is that veterans are dangerous to others in society. As others have observed, the exact number of ex-forces personnel in prison is impossible to know because veterans were not asked to declare their military records until January 2015, meaning that only data on prisoners admitted post-2015 is reliable (Cooper et al. 2018). New initiatives and reviews are in place to improve targeted support for veterans in the criminal justice system, and this is not our primary focus. But the news reporting on criminality (and victims) where a veteran identity is highlighted, or indeed dramas with such storylines, provide interesting and relevant cases to better understand how attributes of military service are associated with criminal behaviour in such narratives.

Veterans as politicised figures or 'political footballs': One telling recurrent response in our survey was the concern that veterans would be viewed by the public as 'far right' activists. This was partly due to the timing of the survey, when those who gathered in Central London to 'guard' the Cenotaph following the vandalization of a number of statues during the Black Lives Matter protests were described as retired soldiers in the press. For some, the respondents wanted to distance themselves from such activity altogether and the associations with far-right activists; for others, this was about the action itself being misrepresented. In this second argument, defending the Cenotaph was the right thing to do, and it was the media who focused on the violent protesters rather than listening to their concerns. It is important to explore further the diversity of values and perspectives encompassed within the 'veteran' identity and the media narratives which co-produce accounts of martial masculinity and sacrifice, at times deemed harmful and at other points celebrated.

These are just some potential avenues for research raised by our survey, and we look forward to pursuing these ideas further as our project develops.

[3] Researchers Dr Ann Luce (Bournemouth University) and Dr Sallyanne Duncan (University of Strathclyde) have recently launched a 'Suicide Reporting Toolkit: For Journalists and Journalism Educators'; this is designed to help journalists make responsible choices in the storytelling process: https://www.suicidereportingtoolkit.com/. This is just one element relevant to reporting on veterans but the toolkit provides a good model for future research advising journalists.

Useful and cited readings

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UK Government: Parliament approves veterans question in next Census: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/parliament-approves-veterans-question-in-next-census (published 13 July 2020).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Veterans and the Media Project

"How Do Veterans See Themselves Represented in British Television Programmes?"

About the survey

Thank you for taking part in our survey to find out how veterans see themselves represented in British television programmes. The survey will take about 10-15 minutes. By taking part you agree for your answers to be used in our research, but please be assured that all answers are anonymous and your participation in the survey is confidential. At the end of the survey, you will have the opportunity to register your interest to take part in further research as part of this project, but you are under no obligation to do so. Thank you for taking the time to complete our survey.

Who can take part?

We warmly invite veteran participants from all branches of the British military and those based in the UK (including, for example, USAF forces). You do not need to be a British citizen, but the focus of the project is on representations in British television programmes (rather than international imports such as *Homeland*).

In the UK a military veteran is defined as anyone who has drawn one day's pay from the Armed Forces. This means all personnel, male or female, who have served for one day or more, in any occupation in the Royal Air Force, Royal Navy, or the Army, including Reservists and National Service personnel, and the Merchant Navy if involved in a conflict. A veteran is therefore not defined by the length, nature of their service, or when they left. They also remain veterans even if discharged from the forces for a serious or criminal breach of the 1955 Army Act.[4]

Survey Questions

1. Age (18-24, 25-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70-79, 80-89, 90-99, 100-109)
2. Gender (Male/Female/Other/Prefer not to say)
3. How would you best describe your ethnicity (or prefer not to say)?
4. Which branch of the military were you in (or prefer not to say)?
5. Have you seen veterans being represented on British television? If yes, which programmes spring to mind?

[4] What is a Veteran? Definition from Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust: https://www.merseycare.nhs.uk/our-services/a-z-of-services/armed-forces-community-services/what-is-a-military-veteran/

6. As a general observation, how positively or negatively did each of these shows represent those veterans?

   1 = very negatively

   2 = negatively

   3 = neither negatively or positively

   4 = positively

   5 = very positively

   6 = mix of positive and negative

Name of programme	How positively or negatively did it represent veterans?	Please add comments to explain your choice if you would like to.

7. Have you seen programmes in which you believe the broadcaster intended a positive representation, but you felt the result was a negative portrayal? If yes, please give examples.
8. Have you seen many representations of disabled veterans or those suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder (or other mental health issues)? If so, which shows and how were they represented?
9. Are there any particular words/terms/phrases used to describe veterans in the shows you've seen that stood out for you? Please include the phrases used in each programme you've mentioned if possible. (Please include what you can remember, even if it is not the exact phrasing. We can always check the programmes mentioned for the exact wording!)
10. Did any of the shows featuring veterans refer to ideas about strength, masculinity, or "overcoming" at all? If yes, which ones?
11. Were any of the veterans you've seen in these shows women and do you think being female affected how they were portrayed? If so, how?
12. Were any of the veterans from Black or minority ethnic groups and did you feel this impacted on the way in which they were portrayed? If so, how?

13. Are there any ways in which television producers could improve the representation of veterans on television? If yes, how might they do this?
14. Is there any particular aspect of how veterans are represented in British television programmes that you think the full version of this project should examine and why?

Would you be interested in hearing more about opportunities for further involvement in this project?

If so, please tick all of the ways that you would be happy to participate and fill in your preferred e-mail address below:

1. More detailed online questionnaire.
2. Interview by e-mail.
3. Interview by video or phone call.
4. Online focus group (for example, responding to particular clips from television programmes).
5. Producing your own creative representations for inclusion in the project with the option of being displayed in an online exhibition on the project's website (for example, photography, short stories, artwork in any format, vlog entries, documentaries).
6. Becoming a veteran advisor on the project. (Veteran advisors will help to give us veterans' perspectives on how we can help veterans to get the most out of the project and will work with academics to be part of the ongoing design of the project.)
7. Other, please specify _____

My preferred e-mail address is: _____

Or feel free to get in touch through our "Contact Us" page:
http://www.veteransandthemedia.com/contact.html

Please note, we will send you details of opportunities to take part in future surveys, focus groups, and events, but there is no obligation take part in future research if you choose not to at a later date.

If you know of any friends or family who might be interested in taking part in the project, please do direct them towards our project website.

If you have any questions or comments about the survey or the wider project, please e-mail Jenna Pitchford-Hyde jenna.pitchford-hyde@uea.ac.uk. More details can also be found on the Veterans and the Media Project website at www.veteransandthemedia.com.

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

"How Do Veterans See Themselves Represented in British Television Programmes?"

About the survey

Thank you for taking part in our survey to find out how veterans see themselves represented in British television programmes. The survey will take about 10-15 minutes. Below, you will find some information about the study. Please have a read and tick the box at the end to confirm you are happy to proceed to the consent page. After you have completed the consent form page, the questionnaire will begin. It should not take more than 10-15 minutes to complete. By taking part you agree for your answers to be used in our research, but please be assured that all answers are anonymous and your participation in the survey is confidential.

What is the aim of this study?

The aim of this study is for the project team to gain a better sense of how veterans see themselves represented in a range of British television programmes (including, but not limited to, drama, documentary, reality talent shows, and sports coverage). It will provide veterans with an opportunity to have their say on how programmes portray veterans. The wider project will also provide the opportunity for veterans to create their own alternative representations. Ultimately, the findings of the project will help the research team to advise media organisations on their policies regarding veterans, ensuring fair representation and inclusivity.

Who can take part?

We warmly invite veteran participants from all branches of the British military and those based in the UK (including, for example, USAF forces). You do not need to be a British citizen, but the focus of the project is on representations in British television programmes (rather than international imports such as *Homeland*).

In the UK a military veteran is defined as anyone who has drawn one day's pay from the Armed Forces. This means all personnel, male or female, who have served for one day or more, in any occupation in the Royal Air Force, Royal Navy, or the Army, including Reservists and National Service personnel, and the Merchant Navy if involved in a conflict. A veteran is therefore not defined by the length, nature of their service, or when they left. They also remain veterans even if discharged from the forces for a serious or criminal breach of the 1955 Army Act.[5]

What do I have to do?

You will be asked to complete an online questionnaire via Survey Monkey. You will be taken straight through to the questionnaire from this link once you have agreed to participate in the study by completing the consent form section.

Are there any risks in taking part?

We do not foresee any risks or hazards for participants taking part in this research. At the end of the questionnaire, should you feel you need support or would like to make contact with other veterans you will be provided with some online links to useful organisations and veterans' groups.

[5] What is a Veteran? Definition from Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust: https://www.merseycare.nhs.uk/our-services/a-z-of-services/armed-forces-community-services/what-is-a-military-veteran/

What are the benefits of taking part?

We hope that you will find the experience enjoyable and rewarding – there are no right or wrong answers and we welcome all comments. You will be providing a valuable insight into your perspective on how veterans are represented on television. Your responses will help the researchers to advise on media policies, and if you wish to become involved in the wider project at a later date, you may have the opportunity to produce creative work with advice from practicing artists, writers, and photographers.

How will my results be used?

The findings will provide insight into any potential changes to media policy that can be made on a national level. Research data, (for example, quotations from the survey), may be used in publications, reports, and other research outputs, but your name will not be used and participants will not be personally identifiable. If you would like us to let you know about future publications connected to this project, please tell us and we will inform you. (Your contact details will be stored securely until we can inform you of the publication and its accessibility).

How will my participation be kept confidential?

All data from the group discussions will be stored securely at the University of East Anglia and the University of Leeds on password protected computers. Only the named researchers will have access to personal data and if you wish to submit your contact details, these will be stored separately to ensure your anonymity. None of the data you provide will be identifiable to you personally. The data will be stored for a total of 10 years, in line with the University of East Anglia policy. All personal data will be stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018) and will not be passed on to any third parties. In the write-up of the research, the data will be presented completely anonymously.

Who has developed this study and has it been approved?

This work is being led by researchers at the University of East Anglia and the University of Leeds. The study has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of East Anglia.

How do I find out more about the wider project or take part in future studies?

At the end of the survey, you will have the opportunity to register your interest to take part in further research as part of this project, but you are under no obligation to do so. Thank you for taking the time to complete our survey. Please note, if you choose to submit your e-mail address at the end of the questionnaire, we will send you details of opportunities to take part in future surveys, focus groups, and events, but there is no obligation take part in future research if you choose not to at a later date.

How can I get fellow veterans involved?

If you know of any friends or family who are veterans and might be interested in taking part in the project, please do forward the survey link to them or direct them towards our project website where they can find the survey link on the “Get Involved” page. More information about the survey and the wider project can be found on our project website: http://www.veteransandthemedia.com

Further information and contact details

If you have any questions or comments about the survey or the wider project, please e-mail Dr Jenna Pitchford-Hyde jenna.pitchford-hyde@uea.ac.uk or feel free to get in touch through our “Contact

Us" page: http://www.veteransandthemedia.com/contact.html. Dr Pitchford-Hyde is Lecturer in Humanities at the University of East Anglia and is leading this research project.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this study!

Resources

Please see below some online resources you may find useful:

The Armed Forces Covenant: https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk

Combat Stress: https://www.combatstress.org.uk

The Royal British Legion: https://www.britishlegion.org.uk

Women's Royal Army Corps Association (WRAC Association): https://wracassociation.org/

The Confederation of Service Charities (COBSEO): https://www.cobseo.org.uk/

The Veterans and Families Research Hub: https://www.vfrhub.com/