

‘We may have bad days . . . that doesn’t make us killers’: How military veterans perceive contemporary British media representations of military and post-military life

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Katy Parry 
University of Leeds, UK

Jenna Pitchford-Hyde 
University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

Abstract

Over the last two decades of long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the media’s attention on military veterans in the UK has been characterized by a series of shifts: from a focus on combat operations; to initiatives to support transition to civilian life; and finally to a largely invisible presence of veteran issues in the mediated public sphere. This article presents findings from an online qualitative survey conducted with British veterans in 2020. The authors’ primary focus is on how veterans express their concerns when asked about varied televised representations of military and post-military experience. How did the respondents perceive differences across television genres (drama, news, reality TV), and how did this affect their engagement? How do they see their veteran identity reflected back at them through popular media culture?

There is a growing research interest in ‘veteran studies’ from a range of disciplines, but the relationship between veteran identity and perceptions of (post)-military representations remains largely under-researched, at least in the UK context. One concern is that negative or misleading stereotypes of veterans among publics could hinder their successful reintegration into society, but the authors are interested in how veterans make sense of such representations across popular media culture, how they imagine the ‘general public’ audience in their reflections, and the nature of veteran identity they project within the survey responses. This study finds that anxieties

Corresponding author:

Katy Parry, University of Leeds, Clothworkers Building North, Leeds LS2 9JT, USA.
Email: k.j.parry@leeds.ac.uk

about 'mad, bad or sad' stereotypical representations of veterans continue, but the diversity within its findings also reaffirms the importance of not treating veterans as a homogeneous group in research.

Keywords

drama, media representation, news, post-military experience, PTSD, qualitative survey, reality TV, television, veterans

Introduction

As British military involvement in the Afghanistan war finally ended with the NATO withdrawal of the few remaining troops in July 2021, a conflict that had been mostly ignored in the national media for a decade was briefly brought back into the news spotlight. Although most UK troops had left by 2014, the 'leaving by the back-door' quality of the supposedly historic moment prompted reflections on what this meant for the Afghan people, but also for veterans and families of soldiers who died or who are dealing with life-changing injuries, with the age-old question of 'was their sacrifice worth it?' – a prominent topic for debate (Jarvis, 2021). Tom Tugendhat, a Conservative MP who had served in Afghanistan, spoke of the 'anger, grief and rage' that he and other veterans felt at the 'shameful' nature of the withdrawal, in an emotional speech greeted with (usually forbidden) applause in the House of Commons chamber (Tugendhat, 2021). This prompted military bodies and the government to highlight the support available for veterans who were struggling with the sense that their service in Afghanistan had not achieved the government's objectives and peace for the civilian population of the country (Office for Veterans' Affairs, 2021). Over the last two decades of long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, media attention has been characterized by a series of shifts: from highly mediated and intensely covered spectacles of war and combat, through to a focus on the 'returning soldier' and the state-led and charity initiatives set up to support those transitioning to civilian life, to a more ambivalent if not largely invisible presence of veteran issues in the mediated public sphere.

This article presents findings from an online survey conducted with British veterans in the summer of 2020, a year before these dramatic events took place. Our primary focus is on what veterans think of the varied nature of mediated visibility of military and post-military experience in the UK media, primarily on television. Following a cultural studies approach, and specifically the 'circuit of culture' model, we are interested in how identities are constructed, regulated and consumed through cultural artefacts and symbolic systems of representation (Du Gay et al., 1997; Hall, 1997). The notion of the 'circuit of culture' foregrounds how culture is meaningfully interpreted through practices of production and consumption, and 'in the construction of identity and the marking of difference' (Hall, 1997: 4). Certain representations can become privileged in popular media, with the potential to open up or close down the codes and narratives associated with certain identity groups. Interrogating each dimension in the 'circuit' enables researchers to identify both the dominant ideological positionings and the processes by which they can be contested. As Hans Schmidt (2020: 13) writes regarding his own

survey research with US veterans: ‘the way that individuals see themselves depicted . . . plays an important part in self-definition and understanding one’s role in society.’

The purpose of our research was to explore veterans’ own perceptions of such representations, and crucially not to imagine the ‘veteran voice’ in a homogenized manner, or even as people who define themselves primarily as ‘veterans’, but to give space to the variety of perspectives. We were particularly pleased that, out of 96 respondents, 26 women took part in the survey (27%), subverting the trend of perceiving veterans as male, and providing space to hear from a generally marginalized group of people (Herman and Yarwood, 2015; Hughes, 2017).

Our questions that guided this research are:

1. When asked about televised representations of military and post-military life, what do veterans identify as the most memorable, concerning or positive portrayals?
2. How do differences in media genre affect the nature of veterans’ identity construction and engagement with military-themed media?

As we detail below, there is a growing research interest in ‘veteran studies’ from a range of disciplines, especially regarding the challenges associated with transition from military to civilian life (Castro and Dursen, 2019), but the relationship between veteran identity and perceptions of (post)-military representations remains largely under-researched, at least in the UK context. There is a concern that negative or misleading stereotypes of veterans among publics could hinder their successful reintegration into society (Phillips, 2020; Smith and True, 2014), but we are interested in how veterans judge such representations across popular culture, how they construct a sense of ‘public’ audience in their reflections, and the nature of the veteran identity they project within the survey responses. Our survey primarily asked about representation on television, but responses often included reflections beyond televised genres.

We now turn to setting out the context for the study, first outlining the UK context for veteran research, before turning to a review of the literature more specifically about veterans, military culture and the media.

Veteran research

Research involving veterans in the UK appears to be growing. The Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT), endowed by the National Lottery Community Fund, is dedicated to funding research into issues facing ex-Service personnel and their families. As part of this, a dedicated ‘Veterans and Families Research Hub’ was initially curated by the Veterans & Families Institute for Military Social Research (VFI) at Anglia Ruskin University. The FiMT Research Centre moves to new management in 2022, led by a consortium of RAND Europe and the King’s Centre for Military Health Research (KCMHR) at King’s College London. The research centre crucially provides summary research and policy reports which are accessible for a lay audience. Our focus is on the UK, but there is a burgeoning area of research beyond this country into veterans’ affairs. A collection by Taylor et al. (2019: v), which started out with the aim to ‘reimagine the veteran’ through

critical examination of ‘the positioning in public discourse and experience of the military veteran’, included contributions from Nigeria and Australia, in addition to European and North American countries. As the editors make clear, ‘veterans as a population should be understood with reference to contemporary culture and media, and current configurations in policy, practice and governance’ (p. xxii).

Existing research on military veterans is often criticized as being something that is *done to* veterans, rather than *with* veterans, as ‘objects’ of study from a distance, in large-scale quantitative surveys (Higate, 2013; Taylor et al., 2019). But the emerging field of Critical Military Studies serves as an umbrella for research that tends to employ methods better suited to reach beyond numerical data, to the *lived experiences* of service personnel, veterans and their families, often drawing upon feminist approaches (Basham et al., 2015; Bulmer and Jackson, 2016).

Taken alongside the reorganization and rebranding of the pensions and support service into ‘Veterans UK’ (under the Ministry of Defence) in 2007, and the more recent creation of the Office for Veteran Affairs (under the Cabinet Office) in 2019, there does appear to be a sea change in institutional attention and attitudes to research, support and policy-making on veteran issues. One key problem for researchers in the past has been that the UK had no reliable system for knowing who veterans were when they interacted with public services, and so data connected to suicides, employment or crime in veteran populations, for example, relied on flawed or incomplete data (Cabinet Office Press Release, 2020). This is now changing, with the 2021 Census including a question on veteran status, and a new personalized care approach for veterans in the NHS (from 2019). A focused search of the COBSEO (Confederation of Service Charities) website directory reaffirms the vast array of charities offering support and services for the armed forces community. The summary here is necessarily brief and is intended to provide some useful context on veterans’ studies in the UK. For the purposes of this project, our interest is explicitly in the perceptions of media representations among veterans, specifically when it comes to how television genres represent and reflect their life experiences.

Veterans in the media and on the media

Research on military portrayals in the media, and certainly on combat situations, is extensive and varied, covering a range of media genres, including television, print media, films and social media platforms. Studies on veteran representation are less common but do exist (McCartney, 2011; Phillips et al., 2020, 2022). When it comes to veteran portrayals in the media, extant research focuses on: veteran portrayals in certain kinds of media (e.g. news, reality TV); specific concerns related to health, disability or gender; and audience studies or public perceptions. We outline examples of each below.

In Parrott et al.’s (2019) study of how regional news publications in the US represented veterans on Twitter, they found three interpretive frames: *charity case* (receiving assistance), *hero* (content that would elicit pride) and *victim* (mistreatment and mental health issues). The authors conclude this offers a narrow representation of ‘what it means to be a veteran’ (p. 702). Similarly, Kleykamp and Hipes (2015) also point to concerns about the media portrayal of veterans as ‘heroes’, ‘perpetrators’ or ‘victims’ in their study

of articles from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* (2003 to 2011). Their research finds that the news media frame veterans as damaged by their service but deserving of government benefits and social assistance. Indeed, the authors find the ‘deservingness’ frame is completely uncontested in coverage and often amplified through a ‘victimization’ frame which emphasizes suffering or sacrifice due to their military service.

A particularly rich area of studies has been that on the ‘unruly’ or wounded bodies of veterans, many drawing upon Elaine Scarry’s (1985) influential work on the ‘body in pain’, and Paul Achter’s (2010) specific contribution on the rhetorical power of veteran bodies as entwined with national identity: ‘their health, their deaths, and their wounds serve as metonyms for both the nation’s health and for the condition of the war’ (p. 49). For example, the Invictus Games, Paralympics and Warrior Games have been studied for the way in which ‘heroic’ injuries are privileged via injured veterans cast as exemplars for national heroism (Caddick et al., 2021), or in the ‘garnering of public support for military personnel and interventions’ (Dawney, 2019: 60). As noted earlier, the decade following the ‘Wars on Terror’ in Iraq and Afghanistan saw a shift to increased visibility of veterans in the media, whether in photography projects, reality TV (Pitchford-Hyde, 2017), or print media (Phillips et al., 2020, 2022). Crucially, it also marked a moment when a ‘hero-fication strategy’ (Kelly, 2013: 728) was implemented in which ‘gendered nationalisms and militarisms can be seen to emerge in new ways’ (Cree, 2020: 220). This strategy worked to address the detrimental effect of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on public support for military action. As the discourses of the War on Terror fade into the past, we are witnessing a new pattern of military representation emerge in which ‘the heroic figure of the soldier was required to be reclaimed and celebrated in renewed ways’ (p. 221). Cree claims that the contemporary version of this military hero figure is unique in that the hero-fication strategy has collided with popular culture so that now ‘*military heroes are celebrities*’ (p. 221, original emphasis).

In terms of self-representation, Woodward and Jenkins (2018) interviewed writers of military memoirs about their motivations and the process of writing: what they choose to include or exclude, and why. Robin Wagner-Pacifici (2021: 113) has written about arguably one of the strangest of these creative projects – former President (and Commander-in-Chief) George W Bush’s portraits of wounded US veterans, titled ‘Portraits of Courage’. As Wagner-Pacifici writes, having the former Commander-in-Chief gaze upon and paint those he sent to war raises complex questions of power, recognition, identity and deference.

A focus on female veteran identity and cultural representation has also provided a corrective to the traditional focus on men and military masculinities (Tasker, 2011). Women veterans might have good reasons to hold contradictory feelings about their military service (especially those who have experienced sexual trauma or discrimination during their military careers), and they can feel unrecognized and unacknowledged by the public (Welland, 2021). Finally, there are studies on public opinion (Latter et al., 2018; Phillips, 2020), audience responses (Pitchford-Hyde, 2022) and veterans’ own perspectives on public or media perceptions (Parry and Thumim, 2017; Schmidt, 2020; Smith and True, 2014). In his qualitative survey of veteran student groups in the US, Schmidt (2020) found respondents largely critical of news coverage of veterans and service members, with common themes of an excessive focus on psychological problems,

demeaning portrayal (broken, unintelligent), excessive heroic portrayal (over-glorification), or insufficient coverage. Schmidt identifies a ‘disconnect’ between how some veterans perceive their self-image and their image in news media (p. 20). Interestingly, public opinion research tends to find a much more favourable view of veterans than that suggested by veterans’ own views of their misrepresentation in (news) media coverage. Latter et al. (2018) found largely positive associations with ex-forces in their focus groups and questionnaires with the general UK public. However, Phillips’ (2020) meta-analysis of 11 opinion polls and surveys suggests the British public tend to have views which are less favourable, for example in regard to employment situations, housing, health and criminality. Overall, such studies raise important questions about the possible misrecognition and fissures between military veterans, civilian society and veterans’ own self-image.

Research design, methods and limitations

Our analytical framework for the survey design and analysis is informed by both the findings of the extant literature outlined above, relevant methodological literature (Fogli and Herkenhoff, 2018) and our own interests in the intersectional dimensions of veteran identity (gender, ethnicity, disability, class). We designed and accessed our online survey using Survey Monkey. All the essential information sheets and consent forms for participants were provided both in the link to the survey and on the ‘Veterans and the Media’ website (<https://www.veteransandthemediacom/>). The survey underwent ethical review at the University of East Anglia (ref: GREC 18-1434). We recruited participants and ran the survey between 5–30 June 2020. Over a three-week period, a total of 96 respondents signed the consent form and completed the survey. We mainly recruited participants via Twitter, 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. However, what the survey has done very effectively is to begin to provide veterans with an opportunity to express how they see themselves represented on British television and to highlight some key concerns.

Qualitative surveys use open-ended questions, and we included such questions in our survey to gain the advantages set out by Braun et al. (2021: 641): ‘qualitative survey data capture what is important to participants, and access *their* language and terminology’ (emphasis in original). Our survey was not fully qualitative, but we believe it captured rich accounts by our respondents, who were able to type responses in their own words – in ‘*their* language’.

Following demographic questions, the survey asked: ‘*Have you seen veterans being represented on British television? If yes, which programmes spring to mind?*’ The goal was to gauge which representations were most meaningful to the respondents, rather than to mention specific programmes. The survey proceeded to ask about negativity and positivity of those programmes they recalled, and then followed up with questions about their observations on PTSD/ disability; recurrent terminology used to describe veterans; ‘overcoming’ narratives; gender; ethnicity; and where media producers could make improvements (the full survey is available via the website link mentioned above).

Responses were analysed thematically, looking for patterns across the *entire* dataset, as advised by Braun et al. (2021), so that expressions of emotions, experiences and sense making could be examined in a cohesive manner. While the survey initially asked about 'British television' (which includes news and entertainment genres), survey responses included reflections on media representations beyond television genres, such as newspapers, films, social media, etc.

We were keen that the survey participants were the first people to read our initial findings and so we produced a survey report aimed at a lay audience, and sent it to all those respondents who had given us an email address, as well as promoting it online (Pitchford-Hyde and Parry, 2020). This article differs from that report in a number of ways: primarily, as an article-length piece, we are able to demonstrate how the study is embedded in the existing scholarship more rigorously; and, secondly, the longer format also allows for an in-depth engagement with quoted text from the qualitative survey responses and a richer thematically-driven analysis.

At this point, it is important to note that we recognize 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 (2013) study, only half of all veterans in the ex-Services group described themselves as 'veterans'. In our survey, some respondents explained that some ex-military personnel do not identify with the term 'veteran': 'Many of us don't like the term veteran. It's a bit American, and implies old. I prefer ex-Air Force.' As such, we are mindful of the terms we use here. Crucially, such feedback opens up discussions about how veterans define themselves in comparison to how the media represents them and how the public perceives them. We are alert to how word choices bring certain connotations with them, but for the wider public and policy definition, this is the most recognizable term. So, whilst we use 'veteran' here, we are very open to questioning and problematizing this term in our conversations with the military community and as the research develops further.

Findings and discussion

In the following discussion, we focus attention on the qualitative results of our survey, specifically: (1) highlighting the areas that veterans identify as the key issues concerning televised media representation; and (2) the ways in which different genres shape interactions with media representations of post-military life. For demographic information on the survey participants please see our earlier report (Pitchford-Hyde and Parry, 2020).

When asked about televised representations of military and post-military life, what do veterans identify as the most memorable, concerning or positive portrayals?

The responses to our survey indicate a level of complexity in terms of the intersections of veteran identities presented in the media, and the way that our veteran respondents feel about those representations. Veterans were quick to identify various groups that they perceived as underrepresented or notably absent from British media outputs, such as

women, ethnic minorities, working-class soldiers and veterans of particular conflicts. Here, we discuss three key intersecting themes already identified in the literature and which attracted particularly strong opinions: disability and mental health, ethnicity and gender.

‘Only the “successful ones”. . . are give[n] air time’: Disability and mental health

When asked, ‘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?’, our respondents were very concerned about the way that disability and mental health issues regarding veterans were portrayed. However, there was variation in how they interpreted this, with some saying that there is too much focus on PTSD and negative connotations, whilst others suggested there should be more coverage of mental health issues in order to de-stigmatize them and highlight examples of good practice. Amongst the participants, there was a slight generational difference in the perception of how PTSD was represented, with many older veterans suggesting there was too much emphasis on it, whilst younger veterans felt that PTSD and other mental health issues should be given more attention. Almost all the participants agreed that current representations of PTSD are largely negative.

For many, there was a strong sense that disabled veterans and those living with PTSD are only represented as what Kleykamp and Hipes (2015) and Parrott et al. (2019) refer to as ‘heroes’ or ‘victims’. As one respondent suggested: ‘only the successful ones (Olympians, fund raisers) are give[n] air time, those whose lives are negatively affected do not seem to be shown.’ Our respondents reinforce Kleykamp and Hipes’s concerns, identifying these heroic images as being specifically associated with ‘overcoming’ narratives, with the majority shown in sporting contexts such as the Invictus Games or Paralympics:

You only see disabled veterans on news items about events such as the Invictus Games. I think representations of PTSD are terrible and just feed widely held misconceptions. The traumatized veteran is a hardy perennial on crime shows as the bad guy – they are always male.

This respondent covers several of our recurrent themes in this comment alone. They emphasize the narrow visibility afforded the physically disabled veteran, while traumatized male veterans are ‘hardy perennials’ cast as perpetrators without nuance (our respondents gave the examples of Cormoran Strike in *Strike* (2017); David Budd in *Bodyguard* (2018); and numerous minor characters in dramas such as *Silent Witness*, *Vera*, *Coronation Street*, *EastEnders* and *Soldier Soldier*). Such representations identified here, of out-of-control hypermasculine veterans, are often used as a convenient plot device and provide a character with an instant ‘backstory’:

Other programmes (can’t think of names) often show soldiers with PTSD in ways I don’t think is true, i.e. this illness drives them to do something unsafe and dangerous, they’re no good to any one etc. Where this is not true at all. We’re capable of doing most things, however we may have bad days that doesn’t make us killers.

Many of the respondents were concerned with how the dramatization of the dangerous, criminal veteran character affects public perceptions, but there is also potential for it to distort priorities when it comes to public services and policy-making on veteran issues (McCartney, 2011). Critical military scholarship focuses attention on how wounded military bodies become remade in redemptive 'heroic' narratives, 'domesticated' and contained in ways that serve the interests of political elites (Achter, 2010; Cree and Caddick, 2020). But veterans who question the 'truth' of the unsettling 'damaged' veteran representation are not necessarily loyal dupes to a dominant narrative of successful transition. They simply do not see their own lived experiences of good days and 'bad days' reflected back, and it is the sometimes-contradictory persistence of their own military identity that prompts them to be so critical of an excess of 'hero-fication' (Kelly, 2013) or demonization. We echo Bulmer and Jackson (2016) in acknowledging the importance of not limiting veterans' capacity to tell their own stories by applying taken-for-granted concepts or an objectifying gaze which over-simplifies their experiences for the purpose of neat categorization in research (see also Bulmer and Eichler, 2017).

These contradictions can be seen in responses to reality TV and documentaries. Some of our respondents found shows like *DIY SOS* problematic in their positioning of veterans as 'helpless', but one respondent highlighted the role that such shows can play in raising awareness of 'the shortfalls in our Government's provision for vets':

The big build [*DIY SOS*] was a lovely example of those disabled and suffering PTSD, well represented in showing their downfall after leaving the service and what they had to go through and then being a chance for a better life.

This response hints at how storylines in television shows can provide complex and nuanced forms of mediated visibility for veterans, even performing a public service role where government provision is lacking. Bulmer and Eichler (2017: 167) have noted a shifting of responsibility for soldiers and veterans away from the government and onto the nation more broadly, with a 'substantial increase of third-sector involvement in veteran care'. Popular media perform an unmatched political role in imagining a national community (Anderson 1983), in this case one which 'cares' for its ex-forces as part of its patriotic duty. Encompassing the public and third-sector organizations in this enterprise can serve to normalize the state-legitimated violence which has led to the life-changing moral and physical injuries that military veterans live with. Such contradictions are captured in the notion of 'post-militariness', which recognizes the complex dialectical tension between military experience coded as both a source of pride and of trauma (Parry and Thumim, 2017): feelings of pride, service and betrayal can co-exist, and popular culture can serve as a resource for examining those troubling tensions.

Not seeing colour in the British military: 'I've not seen any shows or programmes with Black or BAME veterans'

Since none of our survey respondents identified as Black, Asian or from 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 future

research. 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? If so, how?’, two opinions were predominantly expressed, sometimes in an overlapping manner: (1) that ethnic minority veterans are under-represented, and (2) that the military does not see colour.

For example, one respondent highlighted the lack of representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) veterans and identified a very particular set of traits that characterize many of the existing veteran representations on British television:

This is another gap – you rarely see BAME veterans. On TV, veterans are depicted as white, male, lower working class and ‘troubled’.

Here, the respondent provides a list of attributes that correspond with the findings of scholarship on the narrow stereotypes traditionally found in British forces recruitment campaigns, popular media and memorialization culture (Basham, 2016; Danilova and Purnell, 2020; Jester, 2021). Other respondents were also keen to stress the lack of representation as a problem, in this case in terms of how military culture and values are viewed by civilians:

No, I’ve not seen any shows or programs with Black or BAME Veterans, again that’s a bad thing as it makes the military seem racist which it isn’t at all.

The second group of responses we identified were those keen to stress the importance of not misrepresenting the military as racist, already hinted at above. A number of respondents were quick to reinforce the idea that race was of no consequence in the military:

Veterans are colour blind/we served with all nationalities and ethnicities, they are our brothers and sisters.

With regard to how the media represented ethnic minority veterans, one respondent answered:

My take on it is that people who can pass the RM commando course are all brothers or sisters in arms.

Some of our respondents readily highlighted representations of veterans in the media which only recognize ‘colour’ in the flag and uniform, with use of capital letters for emphasis:

Yes there were black Asian Nepalese veterans portrayed too and they too were portrayed as VETERANS – not ‘a colour’ – there’s only FOUR COLOURS in HM Forces and they are; RED WHITE & BLUE and khaki.

Several of our veteran respondents stressed the feeling that when one joins the military, it becomes a person’s overarching identity:

I only see uniform, not colour or gender, everyone is equal in my eyes.

Indeed, there was some criticism of the way that issues around ethnicity and religion were handled in the media and the Army's 2018 recruitment campaign, depicting the issues in an unrealistic manner:

I saw adverts that weren't realistic trying to integrate muslim beliefs and making the military look diverse when in reality soldiers fight for each other anyway but we have all had to earn this right with each other. We do not care about religion when we are in combat we only care for each other.

Though well-intentioned, such interpretations of a united military identity are deeply problematic, in that British military identity is (as some of our other respondents highlighted) traditionally white, British, male and hierarchical across class, race, religion and gender differences. For white, heterosexual, male recruits, adopting a military identity may be relatively straightforward, but for those who do not fit into this narrow definition (for example, women, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ and those following other religions), a lack of acknowledgement of their own identities could cause a feeling of erasure (Goldstein, 2018). It is striking just how keen the respondents are to stress the equal treatment and 'care' for all soldiers. Notably this is a right 'earned' with each other, by passing 'the RM commando course' or sharing a uniform. But it is important to note that no one here appears to be speaking from the perspective of an ethnic minority veteran, and this 'colour-blind' rhetoric runs the risk of diminishing the diverse and unequal experiences of veterans. In future research we intend to gather perspectives from Commonwealth and other ethnic minority veterans to provide some balance to the above views.

'It's not often you see a female veteran in a real show': Gendering military women and veterans

When asked, '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?', the key issues identified were: (1) the under-representation of women veterans, and (2) the misrepresentation or unrealistic depiction of their experiences.

Our participants were keen to highlight that very few women veterans are represented in the media: 'very rarely are female vets shown.' They noted that of the few women veterans who do appear, most are those who participated in World War II rather than more recent conflicts:

I was the one female in WOL [*Without Limits*]. However, it's not often you see a female veteran in a real show. We have Michelle Keegan who plays a female soldier (but not yet a veteran) [*Our Girl*].

Where women veterans are featured, our respondents felt that the depictions often play into problematic stereotypes of military women as 'opinionated' and 'hardened' or as romantic interests of male characters:

The females in these shows are often seen as either really bossy or not listened to or second to the men. When in the military this isn't a fair representation at all. They sometimes show

women as ‘love interests’ and it kills me because we’re not. We served our country just like the men did and we deserve to be shown that way!

Our Girl is discussed by several of our contributors but, as the participant above highlighted, the character played by Michelle Keegan, and previously Lacey Turner, is depicted serving in the forces. Whilst it is important to acknowledge this distinction, it is also crucial to note that several of our female participants saw this high-profile depiction of military women as important nonetheless. This was a lead character in a popular mainstream television show, with the pilot episode attracting 6.31 million viewers (consolidated viewing figures). Some of our participants found *Our Girl* to be unrealistic, but one felt that the central character eventually challenged ideas about women in the military requiring protection from male colleagues in the combat zone:

The lead character was a woman. And she was portrayed as always needing protection/shielding. But the character turned that on its head.

Our survey asked the veterans ‘Did any of the shows featuring veterans refer to ideas about strength, masculinity, or “overcoming” at all? If yes, which ones?’ Crucially, some of our female participants identified the image of veterans as ‘masculine’ as itself marginalizing 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?

Interestingly, one female participant raised this as an issue with the survey:

Why did you use the word masculinity here? As a female veteran you are excluding me from answering this question by inferring that not being masculine is therefore weak and not ‘overcoming’.

Whilst our intention was to highlight the ways in which narratives about overcoming can be problematically masculinized and under-represent women veterans (Godier-McBard et al., 2021), here it was interpreted as playing into the stereotypes propagated by the media. Consequently, we as researchers should be mindful of the language used in a survey context, where terms such as masculinity are understood as qualities associated exclusively with men, and as something out of reach of women (‘therefore weak’). As Pears (2021) argues in her analysis of *SAS: Who Dares Wins*, popular representations of the creation of the elite soldier-body eschew the feminine, and when female contestants are introduced in the programme, the masculine ideal remains unchanged and unchallenged. With new targets announced for female recruitments of the UK Armed Forces in December 2021, the Ministry of Defence has said it intends to double numbers of women in the forces by 2030 and change the male-dominated culture, partly in response to a damning Defence Committee report on women’s experiences earlier that year (BBC, 2021; UK Parliament Defence Committee, 2021). Bullying, sexual assault and a lack of justice for those who report such crimes (whether male or female) are issues finally in the

media spotlight. But implementing structural changes will be challenging, and it will be interesting to see whether popular cultural notions of the ideal soldier and veteran become less gender-specific; but also how this shift to inclusivity could work inversely to legitimize military values and militarism in society more generally.

How do differences in media genre affect the nature of veterans' identity construction and engagement with military-themed media?

The responses to the survey acknowledged significant differences in terms of how media genres approach the representation of veterans. Below, we focus on the genres cited most often, with the medium of television dominating, not surprisingly given the focus in the survey design. The genres attracting most disillusionment were news media, soap, drama and reality shows. Many of the respondents felt strongly about misrepresentation in the news media, with the prevailing feeling that veterans were often portrayed in a negative light due to frequently being framed as dangerous or broken:

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 representative of the UK's current veteran population or their needs. For context, it is important to acknowledge that the survey was conducted in June 2020 (during the Covid-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests), and there is a sense in the responses that 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'. In particular, our participants voiced strong concerns about the repeated framing of PTSD as the root of dangerous behaviour: the 'classic caricature seems to be drunk, aggressive, mad'.

The next categories most frequently mentioned by our respondents were television dramas and soap operas. These were largely received as negative or inaccurate in their portrayal of veterans. 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 dramas such as *Vera* and *Silent Witness*) or 'thugs' (*Our Girl*). The respondents were most concerned about the impression that such portrayals of veterans create 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)

There is a tangible 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*). Soap operas appear to be some of the biggest culprits with one respondent observing that

EastEnders portrayed the veteran as a psychotic moron who just wants to hurt people for fun when we are not like this at all.

One veteran explained that the misrepresentation and lack of research by such programmes caused him to disengage with the programme entirely:

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

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

whilst another identified inaccuracies in the programme's research of military roles:

Emmerdale had the Veteran as a combat veteran when he was an Army chef, they don't see combat as they are REMFs [Rear Echelon Mother Fuckers].

These comments point to the persistent focus on combat or infantry roles when dramas feature military veterans, and a woeful lack of understanding as to what military roles entail for most service personnel.

For some of our participants, the ways in which issues affecting veterans were approached by the media producers was the deciding factor in whether they engaged with the programmes at all. As this veteran suggests, representations can have a real impact on public perceptions of veterans, and consequently on available support:

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 too hard. Living each day is the hardest . . . More awareness equals more support and understanding.

Several veterans mentioned *SAS: Who Dares Wins* as a 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.

Such comments chime with Pears's (2021) analysis of the military masculinities on display in *SAS: Who Dares Wins*. However, one of our respondents voiced concerns about such overcoming narratives 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' had a very similar effect.

The diversity of responses here speaks to the importance of examining moments of media consumption, and how cultural meanings are negotiated and contested alongside constructions of identity (Du Gay et al., 1997). Overall, respondents felt that documentaries offered a more positive representation than television dramas, but there was still a tendency to dramatize 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 glamourised, traumatized or catastrophized and people assume that's real life.

One participant was able to give an insight into how they and their peers were treated as veteran subjects in the documentary *Without Limits: Australia*:

As this was a documentary these issues were shown and described perfectly by the soldiers in the programme. We were listened to and our injuries/illnesses were represented perfectly and told in a way other veterans and civilians could relate to!

There is a sense in this response that the documentary format had the potential to offer a more realistic depiction of the veteran, providing that the makers truly *listened* to the participants. The respondent was very satisfied with how she and her fellow veterans had been represented and cited the show's treatment of veterans – and the producers' efforts to normalize military-related chronic pain and mental health issues – as a benchmark of good practice:

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 normalized the 'stigma' around it and got the point across.

Conclusion

The return of Afghanistan to Taliban rule raises grave concerns for Afghans who worked with NATO forces and NGOs, and for the girls and women who had some opportunity for education and a range of jobs, even working at the highest levels of government, media and the judiciary. But these are also difficult times for the families of those who lost loved ones and for the soldiers and veterans who feel conflicted about the value of their military service. In response, the UK Government has increased levels of support for 'Op Courage', the mental health and wellbeing service, in a bid to cut suicide rates among veterans (Gye, 2021). The renewed attention on military veterans and families at this time reaffirms just how important it is to examine mediated representations of military life and post-military transition, as the '9/11 wars' become less visible and more intangible for the UK civilian population.

We recognize that the survey cannot be demographically representative or generalizable 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 three weeks, 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 and researchers in general. This is also reflected in the numbers who indicated interest in future research participation, and we would like to extend this initial investigative survey with interviews and focus groups. Our study finds support for the concerns about ‘mad, bad or sad’ stereotypical representation of veterans, echoing previous studies (Kleykamp and Hipes, 2015; McCartney, 2011; Parrott et al., 2019; Schmidt, 2020). Respondents suggest a number of ways this could be improved: increased research and consultation with veterans; a more nuanced approach to representing veterans with PTSD; a better balance between highlighting important issues that veterans are dealing with; and showing the ‘ordinariness’ of post-service life for many veterans.

We are also interested in exploring further how veterans’ impressions of the media connect with the actual patterns of coverage across the media – not only news coverage (as previous research has primarily focused on), but also reality TV, documentaries, drama and other relevant media content. To fully understand the ‘circuit of culture’ (Du Gay et al., 1997) specific to the lived and mediated realities for veterans, we require analysis that examines the exchanges between representation, identity and popular culture, across the different ‘moments’ in which meanings are produced, consumed and contested. This would involve examining media content alongside perceptions, a strand of research we hope to develop in future research. We are not suggesting that veterans are merely mistaken about the negativity across media genres, but we are interested in exploring how and why certain media portrayals are considered to have particularly harmful repercussions for some veterans. We also reaffirm the importance of not treating veterans as a homogeneous or passive group, and this is especially important when their identity is deployed in simplified or politically dubious initiatives, as symbols for the nation state or ‘unruly bodies’ (Achter, 2010) to be tamed. Further research *with* veterans does not preclude scrutiny into the political work of narratives of redemption, resilience and martial masculinities, but we are keen to merge our critical appraisals with insights from a diverse range of people who have served in the forces.

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ORCID iDs

Katy Parry  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3654-6489>

Jenna Pitchford-Hyde  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6677-6114>

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Author biographies

Katy Parry is Associate Professor in Media and Communication at the University of Leeds. Her work focuses on visual politics and activism, images of war and representations of contemporary soldiering. Her books include *Visual Communication: Understanding Images in Media Culture* (SAGE, 2019), co-authored with Giorgia Aiello, and *Spaces of War, War of Spaces*, co-edited with Sarah Maltby, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle. She is a co-convenor of the Political Studies Association's 'Media and Politics' Group.

Jenna Pitchford-Hyde is Lecturer in Humanities at the University of East Anglia. Her research focuses on contemporary war narratives in literature and media with particular interests in masculinity, technology, and disability studies. Recent publications include 'Masculinity, Identity, and Disabled Veterans: How British Audiences Respond to Representations of Military Veterans on Prime Time BBC Programmes' (Pompper, *Rhetoric of Masculinity*, 2022), and 'Bare Strength: Representing Veterans of the Desert Wars in US Media' (*Media, Culture & Society*, 2017).