RESEARCH

"Hero-Worship" or "Manipulative and Oversimplifying": How America's Current and Former Military Service Members Perceive Military-Related News Reporting

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Military-related journalism serves an important purpose, and has a special relevance in the modern era of nearly continuous American military involvement. Yet, conflicting goals have long made relations between journalists and the military difficult, and both institutions have faced abundant criticism regarding the role each plays in providing information to the public. This study seeks to provide additional perspective on the topic, and involves a consideration of the views held by individual military service members and veterans regarding military-related news. Data gathered from interviews suggests that, while a diversity of perspectives exist, widespread frustration with military-related reporting is very common among the military population.

Keywords: Journalism; Reporting; Military; Veterans; Service Members

Introduction

Though much has changed since modern war journalism began to take shape on the front lines of the Crimean War more than 150 years ago, war, conflict, and military-related reporting remains a challenging occupation, marked by a variety of conflicting goals and objectives. On a basic level, reporters strive to report accurately and objectively. Yet, achieving an objective viewpoint can be especially difficult for reporters who must rely on military support for basic access to information, facilities, and personnel (Moorcraft & Taylor, 2008; Tumber & Weber, 2006). Objectivity can be further challenging because journalists often come from very different backgrounds than many of the military service members about whom they are writing (Kaplan, 2004).

Journalists also face pressure to develop reports and content that will be both appealing and understandable to an audience that generally has little personal knowledge of military-related topics (Dawson, 1994; Paris, 2000). Serving as an intermediary or interpreter between those with and those without military experience can be especially challenging (Ingham, 2014) because such topics are often laden with cultural, nationalistic, or ideological perspectives (Parry & Thumim, 2017).

Meanwhile, military reporters also face a continually uneasy relationship with the military itself. Indeed, the "deep-rooted struggle" (Moorcraft & Taylor, 2008, p. ix)

between freedom of information and speech, and state security-related secrecy, has long been acknowledged and documented (Armoudian, 2016; Taylor, 2003). Most of this "struggle" exists at the institutional level, and involves the conflicting goals of journalism and the military establishment. Much less, however, is understood regarding the way that individual members of the military feel about military-related journalism. Yet, knowing more about these perspectives is increasingly relevant today, given the effect that continuous war has had on the nation, and the interconnected social media culture in which individual viewpoints are increasingly relevant to broader public debate. In such an environment, as explained by Cooley's (1902) theory of the looking glass self, the way that individuals see themselves depicted—both in their own social media content and professional media—plays an important part in self-definition and understanding one's role in society (Jones, 2015). Accordingly, this study focuses on the diverse perspectives held by individual service members and veterans regarding military-related news coverage.

Review of Literature

A few broad categories of related research might be briefly considered, including research focused on (1) media coverage of wars and conflicts; (2) media coverage of military service members and veterans; and (3) perceptions regarding

media coverage of wars, conflicts, military-related topics, service members, or veterans. An exhaustive discussion of research in such categories is beyond the scope of this paper, yet a sampling of notable studies warrants consideration.

Coverage of wars and conflicts

An abundance of research has considered different aspects of news media coverage of recent wars and conflicts. First, some studies have focused on the coverage of wars in which the US has been directly involved. For instance, notable studies have investigated the conflict between emotional attachment and objectivity in video news coverage (Cohen, 2010), the conflict between patriotism and objectivity (Murphy, Ward, & Donovan, 2006), the relationship between US news media coverage and government policy regarding the war on terror (Bahador, 2011; Bennett, 2013), TV news coverage of the second U.S.-Iraq war (Ellmers, 2018), newspaper coverage of the second US-Iraq war (Dimitrova, 2006), mainstream and new web-based coverage of the second US-Iraq war (Jordan, 2007), news media coverage of itself during both Iraq wars (Esser, 2009), political bias in news coverage of the justification of the second US-Iraq war (Greenwald, 2010), and coverage of anti-war protests or movements in the U.S. (Klein, Byerly, & McEachern, 2009).

Other research has explored the connections between news consumers and news content. For instance, studies have focused on public perceptions of credibility regarding Iraq war reporting (Choi, Watt, & Lynch, 2006), the effect of exposure to war coverage on audience response and opinion formation (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2008; Dahmen, 2015; Gelpi, 2010), and public knowledge of military- or veteran-related issues (Gribble et al., 2012; Ministry of Defense, 2013).

Coverage of military service members and veterans

Research has also considered the coverage of veterans. Overall, research suggests that most news coverage of veterans and service members is positive (Ward, 2008), and that the positive media treatment of veterans is common even during unpopular wars (Hallin, 1989; Patterson, 1982; Wintour, 2014). Yet, despite the generally positive coverage, a variety of problems with such reports have been identified. For instance, stereotypical coverage— including what might be seen as positive stereotypes—are common in news and entertainment media (Merry, 2015). Even when portrayals are well intentioned, such stereotypical depictions can be inaccurate or not representative of actual individual experiences and can "homogenize" veterans (Kleykamp & Hipes, 2015, p. 352). For example, research shows that military service members are often framed as stoic, heroic, patriotic, or dedicated (Webber & Long, 2014; see also Kelly, 2013; McClancy, 2013; Pitchford-Hyde, 2017; Woodward et al., 2009), hypermasculine (Young, 2003; see also Achter, 2010; Christensen, 2008; Drew, 2004), or even superhuman (Chrisinger, 2016; Parrott et al., 2018). Similarly, some have noted the sentimental (McWilliam & Bickle, 2017) and nostalgic (Rech, 2014) nature, or manufactured

structure (King, 2010), of much coverage focused on the war experiences of veterans and service members. Such coverage—while often well-meaning—serves to perpetuate a narrowly defined warrior myth that both glorifies and limits the actions of military members and veterans (Ehrenreich, 1997; Ivie & Giner, 2016), makes vulnerabilities invisible (Miles, 2013), and emphasizes traditionally masculine identities that may not be representative of actual service members or their experiences (Christensen, 2008; Drew, 2004; Pitchford-Hyde, 2017).

In other instances, veterans and service members are framed quite differently (McCartney, 2010), and coverage sometimes portrays them as being damaged, disillusioned (McClancy, 2013), charity cases, victimized, broken, disabled, traumatized (Chrisinger, 2016; Huebner, 2011; Parrott et al., 2018; Pitchford-Hyde, 2017; Schuman et al., 2016), part of an "at-risk population" (Kleykamp & Hipes, 2015, p. 349; Millar, 2016; Parrott et al., 2018), suicidal (Schuman et al., 2016; Sisask & Värnik, 2012), or even, at times, dangerous (Chrisinger, 2016; Hoit, 2012).

Admittedly, such seemingly negative portrayals can sometimes prove beneficial. For instance, the coverage of veterans' problems has been shown to lead to the development of useful government and civic programs, such as increased government benefits or healthcare (Feinstein, 2015; see also US Department of Defense, 2002). Yet, such portrayals can also be personally and professionally hurtful. Notably, such portrayals are often at odds with the way in which many veterans see themselves and characterize their military experience (National Veterans Foundation, 2016; Parrott et al., 2018; Pew Research Center 2011), and have been shown to cause the general public to develop a very narrow understanding of veterans (MacLean & Kleykamp, 2014; Kleykamp & Hipes, 2015; Wilbur, 2016), and even diminish employment opportunities for veterans reentering the civilian workforce (Hunter, 2017).

Given such issues with mainstream media coverage, it is not surprising that many in the military have turned to new media technologies to tell their own story. Such service-member-created media has also been studied, and research has considered military blogs and letters (Shapiro & Humphreys, 2013), visual media (Kennedy, 2009; Struk, 2011), video (McSorley, 2012; Silvestri, 2013), and the differences between first-person accounts distributed via social media and traditional news coverage (Maltby & Thornham, 2016; Parry & Thuminim, 2017; Silvestri, 2015).

Perceptions of coverage

Aside from research that has looked at public perceptions of news coverage, scholars and writers have also investigated views of journalists regarding war reporting (Winburn, 2003), perceptions of newspaper journalists regarding the portrayal and framing of the war on terror (Lewis & Reese, 2009), views of embedded reporters regarding how they covered war (Fahmy & Johnson, 2005), views of war correspondents and editors regarding how the experiences of reporters shapes coverage (Markham, 2011), and other more

general perspectives of journalists regarding the enterprise of war reporting (Johnson & Fahmy, 2010; Wyatt, Andsager, & Bodle, 1994; Wyatt, Smith, & Andsager, 1996).

Much less research has considered the views of veterans regarding war and conflict reporting. Among those studies that have looked into the topic is a recent study by Parry and Thumim (2017), which considered how military personnel, veterans, and family members engage with alternatingly helpful and problematic media portrayals of the military and service members. Eberhard (1989) considered views of US veterans regarding the quality of war coverage and veterans' experiences interacting with journalists. Patterson (1982) considered Vietnam War veterans' perspectives on how news media reports affected the way they were treated after returning home. Adams (1977) considered views of combat and non-combat Vietnam War veterans regarding television coverage of that war. However, many of such studies are old, and much has changed in the ensuing years regarding the nature of news media. Further, the composition of America's military is quite different today than during past conflicts (US Department of Defense, 2017). As such, new research into the topic is warranted.

Focus of Research

Clearly, much scholarship has already considered various aspects of war, conflict, and military-related reporting. The largest portion of such related scholarship involves content analyses or critical evaluations of news content. Yet, less is known regarding how such coverage is perceived; one especially underdeveloped area of research involves investigations into how service members and veterans actually view news media coverage of themselves, the military organizations in which they serve, and the wars or conflicts they participate in. Accordingly, this study attempts to begin to address this need, and is framed around two research questions.

RQ$_1$: How do military service members and veterans perceive news media coverage of wars, conflicts, and the military overall?

RQ$_2$: How do military service members and veterans perceive news media coverage of military service members and veterans?

Methodology

This study builds on existing survey-based research (Schmidt, 2019) and employs a qualitative analysis of responses to open-ended interview questions. Existing studies involving journalism and military populations have shown such qualitative techniques to be effective. For example, Parry and Thumim (2017) conducted an analysis of data from focus groups involving 31 participants who were either military veterans or spouses, and Woodward, Jenkings, and Winter (2011) conducted interviews with members of the British military. Such designs can be especially useful for three main reasons. First, qualitative research allows for the exploration of individual perspectives with much greater detail than can be obtained with a quantitative analysis of survey results.

Second, asking open-ended questions gives participants the opportunity to share their individual and nuanced views, and can lead to the identification of new themes that would not otherwise have been anticipated. Third, a consideration of direct responses of participants can reduce the risk of misinterpretation by scholars who are otherwise detached from the military (Gray, 2016).

While the method was informed by existing research, this study's design was unique because of the specific population included, the number of participants, and the topics considered. Both the measure and sampling method received Institutional Review Board approval and the study was granted "exempt" status (Study ID # STUDY00007749).

Sample

Participants came from a sample of members and directors of student veteran groups at colleges, universities, and technical schools across the United States. Email invitations were sent to email addresses that were published on the directory of Student Veterans of America, and 122 individuals agreed to participate by answering several open-ended questions.

The mean age of participants was 43.87 years ($SD = 12.93$), and 70.5% ($n = 86$) identified as male, 28.7% ($n = 35$) identified as female, and .8% ($n = 1$) identified as "other" or did not respond with their sexual identity. The average participant served for 12.58 years ($SD = 8.10$), and 66.4% ($n = 81$) had combat experience.

Measure

Because participants were geographically dispersed, and in order to make participation as easy as possible and encourage a higher response rate, this study involved answering open-ended questions on a web-based survey platform (James & Busher, 2006; see also Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Dimond et al., 2012; Egan, 2008; Ratislavova & Ratislav, 2014). Participants were asked six open-ended questions. Responses were then read by the lead researcher and emergent themes were identified. After preliminary themes were identified, participant responses were read and analyzed a second time, coded for themes, and grouped into thematic categories that addressed the two stated research questions.

Results

Perceptions involving coverage of wars, conflicts, and the military

Regarding the first research question, a variety of themes became apparent in participant responses. Notably, some themes were associated with perceived positive aspects of news coverage, and others were associated with perceived negative aspects of coverage.

Positive views

Relatively few participants ($n = 19$) expressed having a favorable impression of war and military-related reporting. Some participants ($n = 6$) did, however, suggest that news reports were at their best when depicting the US military as strong or capable. For example, one 22-year-old male service mem-

ber with four years of military experience suggested that he saw such depictions often, and that the military is frequently portrayed, "as an impregnable force."

Some other participants ($n = 5$) stated that war reports were especially effective and useful when focusing on the consequences of military actions, and the destruction that is caused by war. As one 41-year-old woman veteran with five years of military experience noted, "At least now, as compared to my generation of service, media can show the public consequences of war, i.e., caskets, funerals, human cost."

Similarly, one 26-year-old woman veteran who served in the military for four years said, "They definitely have presented more … than would have been shown in previous eras, such as beheading journalists, burning children alive, public hangings, stonings, et cetera. Before, a lot of that was hidden from the public." However, no dominant complementary themes emerged in participant responses, and other positive comments ($n = 8$) did not fit within any clear thematic category.

Critical views

Many participants ($n = 98$) were critical of news media coverage; several common themes were identified, and some critical views ($n = 2$) did not fit into clear thematic categories.

Exploitive

The most common criticism ($n = 20$) levied against journalists was that the industry is populated by self-serving individuals who use the military to advance their own careers and profit. Some comments focused on perceived financial self-interest. For example, a 57-year-old male combat veteran who served in the military for 15 years stated, "The media in general is focused on selling newspapers, air-time, social media space, not reporting the facts and realities surrounding armed conflict." Similarly, a 45-year-old male combat veteran with 20 years of experience stated, "They portray whatever gets the most viewers and gets the most money."

Others felt journalists were mostly seeking personal prominence. A 60-year-old woman veteran with 28 years of experience stated, "News media doesn't care about anybody … unless it gets them [journalists] in the limelight."

A 39-year-old male combat veteran who served for four years had an especially cynical perspective, and stated, "At least they are reliably manipulative and oversimplifying, so you don't have to wonder if they're being manipulative and oversimplifying."

Sensationalistic

Some participants ($n = 11$) highlighted what they perceived was sensationalistic war reporting. One 45-year-old male combat veteran who served for 21 years stated, "Service members seem to be used as … a dog whistle to get the viewers or readers excited about a topic."

A 50-year-old male veteran who served for seven years stated, "Media in the US is too entertainment focused. They only report on what can be sensationalized. In other words, they are focused on entertaining their audience by going with stories based on opinions, speculation, and skewed facts. It is sad when there really isn't much of a difference between watching a news network and Entertainment Tonight."

Subjective/biased

Many ($n = 18$) reported feeling that journalistic objectivity was important, yet lacking in the contemporary news industry. For example, a 21-year old service woman stated, "I feel that the media tries to give unbiased descriptions and thorough descriptions. I value this. However, I often wonder how much of this is genuinely unbiased … the media has been used as propaganda in the past."

Similarly, a 33-year-old male combat veteran with 20 years of military experience stated, "I think media is a powerful tool for accountability. However, it is paramount that media then also be held accountable for relaying facts with as little bias as possible."

Others had much stronger criticism, such as a 59-year-old male combat veteran with 20 years of military service, who said, "Reporters no longer report news to inform the public. Everything is twisted with their political agendas and personal opinions to represent the news as they see it not as they rely are. The news media, in my opinion, are completely dishonest and not trustworthy."

Some also contrasted the contemporary journalism environment with that they remember from previous eras. One 50-year-old male veteran with seven years of military service stated, "They should go back to the way the news was done when Walter Cronkite was anchoring. The reporters went out and reported the facts, not opinions and speculation."

Misinformed

A number of participants ($n = 10$) suggested that reporters frequently misunderstand the military topics they cover. Some saw this as a problem but were also sympathetic to the efforts made by journalists. As one male combat veteran who served in the military for 13 years, and who did not state his age, remarked, "I believe they do the best they can with what they know. Faulty reporting is usually based on ignorance of the subject matter rather than hostility or indifference."

Others suggested that this general misinformation is because of an overreliance on high-level official sources, which can cause reporters to be personally out-of-touch with realities. A 54-year-old male combat veteran who served in the military for 28 years said, "The media assumes they understand the military decision making process. They presume to understand what goes into strategy. They do not recognize the human factor that affects operations on the ground."

Similarly, a male combat veteran with 21 years of experience, and who did not state his age, said, "They have little understanding and their advisors are always general officers who tend to not have a real view of the gritty battle."

Politically-focused

A number of comments ($n = 11$) addressed the perception that news media place too much of an emphasis on politics and politicians. One 43-year-old male combat veteran with 20 years of military experience simply stated, "News media tends to try to politicize the military." Some, like a 45-year-old combat veteran with 21 years of service, pointed to how military figures and equipment can be used as, "a backdrop for many political topics."

Others lamented coverage given to politicians who blame the military for policy failures. "Unfortunately, the military is always associated with political agendas which they are not responsible for since they are following our government's orders," said a 59-year-old male combat veteran with 20 years of experience.

Another participant, a 33-year-old male combat veteran who served in the military for four years said, "It disturbs me when I see veterans being leveraged as political pawns. Media and politicians often speak on behalf of veterans they know or veterans in general, when in actuality, ideals and partisan beliefs and values run a whole spectrum of diversity among veterans."

Or, a 28-year-old male combat veteran with 7 years of experience stated, "They focus on … governments and policies while ignoring those who are sacrificing their bodies and minds for their right to do so."

Pro-war

Many participants ($n = 19$) stated that they felt news reports frequently adopt a pro-war tone, and inappropriately avoid controversial or complicated perspectives that do not fit into a nationalistic narrative. As one participant, a 55-year-old combat veteran who served in the military for 30 years said, "We glorify war in the news, media, and games because it sells. Hollywood, gamers, and news industry are making millions off the glory of war. The people need to understand not the glory, but the gore of war."

Another, a 30-year-old male combat veteran with six years of military service noted that news coverage focuses on "positive support our troops campaigns," but "never talks about the evil acts that some members do." A 37-year-old male combat veteran with 18 years of service similarly stated, "They try not to portray [sic] in a negative light even when there are issues."

Some others suggested that their discomfort with pro-war coverage was directly based on their own observations and experiences when at war. One participant, a 34-year-old male combat veteran who served for nine years stated, "War is terrible. Our society has become too desensitized and unattached. As a combat veteran I do not hold myself above or more worthy than the citizen without military service. But in a democracy all citizens are responsible for armed conflicts. The red, white, and blue hero worship and uber-patriotism disturbs me as a veteran."

Or, as a 29-year-old male combat veteran with 11 years of service remarked, "The worst aspects are when you don't see the human toll. Not just seeing the deaths, but also the maiming, the killing, carrying those who were deceased or maimed. The U.S.A.'s population will never understand those who killed. The closest they'll ever be is the x-box, and that's not even scratching the surface of how fear affects you."

Sympathetic/not critical

Another, less commonly addressed, category of comments ($n = 7$) focused on the view that reporters are insufficiently critical of military policy. For example, one 37-year-old male combat veteran with 18 years of military experience stated, "I call it the Vietnam effect. News media are reluctant to say that we are flawed due to the reaction of the public after Vietnam."

Similarly, a 51-year-old male combat veteran with 18 years of military experience stated, "The news media tends to portray the military of the U.S. as inherently good and fails to address or denies [sic] systemic issues impacting the military." A 30-year old participant similarly noted, "The U.S. military is almost always seen as glorified, and significant mistakes that usually result in retaliations or worsening of situations are rarely covered or glossed over."

Perceptions involving coverage of military service members and veterans

Regarding the second research question, responses again fell into thematic categories that involved either perceived positive or negative aspects of news coverage.

Positive views

Few participants ($n = 26$) expressed positive views regarding the news coverage of veterans and service members. The only commonly expressed complementary viewpoint ($n = 12$) was that journalists effectively separate service members from policy discussions about wars and conflicts. "They [journalists] tend to be supportive of soldiers regardless of how they report on conflicts," said one 28-year-old male combat veteran with six years of military experience.

A 40-year-old woman veteran with six years of military experience similarly expressed, "They separate the service members from the conflict."

Or, as a male combat veteran with 13 years of military service who chose not to state his age expressed, "There is a tendency, especially at the local level, to honor troops irrespective of their views on war."

Some ($n = 6$) also expressed the idea that such coverage is both good for veterans and important for the non-military public. One 69-year-old male veteran with 14 years of military experience noted, "Maintaining the focus on the voluntary sacrifices that take place daily. These ultimate sacrifices along with those quiet sacrifices of carrying the burden of battlefield witness are marginally exposed in the coverage, which is good since those who did not walk those hallowed fields will never know." Other positive comments ($n = 8$) did not fit within a clear thematic grouping.

Critical views

The majority of comments ($n = 87$) regarding coverage of veterans and service members were critical; several themes were commonly expressed, and some critical views ($n = 9$) did not fit into clear thematic categories.

Excessive focus on psychological problems

Many participants ($n = 23$) expressed the idea that journalists exaggerate the prevalence of psychological problems among veterans and service members. For example, a 46-year-old male combat veteran with 10 years of military experience said, "The media makes us look needy and as if we all have PTSD or TBI."

Some also expressed the idea that psychological problems were often linked with unhealthy or violent behaviors. For example, one 37-year-old male combat veteran with eight years of military experience reported feeling like his peers are typically portrayed, "as mentally ill warmongering kids."

A 41-year-old woman veteran with five years of service stated coverage often portrays veterans as suffering from "crazy vet syndrome." Some expanded on such observations, noting that positive stories about veterans who have been successful in their post-military life, or who are better psychologically adjusted, receive too little attention. For example, a 49-year-old male combat veteran with 20 years of military experience said, "They tend to either present heroes or broken people. The 99% of those on the rest of the bell curve are often disregarded."

Or, a 58-year-old woman combat veteran with 20 years of experience said, "There are a lot of good things that military members do that never gets publicized. There are a lot of former military members who are healthy and productive citizens. However, those with PTSD or other ailments make the news."

Similarly, a male combat veteran who served for 20 years, and did not state his age, expressed the view that there is little financial incentive for media to report positive stories, saying, "Far too often we are reporting on psychologically and or physically injured military members because those stories sell. It doesn't sell newspapers that Joe Smith from Davenport went to Afghanistan three times, got out of the military, went to college, and now works as an Account Manager for American Eagle. Yawn. That story won't sing, but it is far more representative of what I see than what the media tries to sell us."

Negative or demeaning portrayals

Other participants ($n = 17$) felt that news reports too often perpetuate negative stereotypes about service members, especially involving intelligence and education. For example, a 28-year-old male combat veteran with five years of military experience reported feeling that the military is often portrayed as being, "full of college rejects, high school dropouts, and rednecks."

A 26-year-old woman veteran with four years of service stated, "I feel that news media portrays military members as unintelligent, that we are all just simply following orders with no intuition or conscience."

A 60-year-old male veteran with 20 years of service stated, "Our military members often are portrayed as unintelligent, unable to be creative or capable of acting on their own. They [media] make it seem as if they are stupid when in fact our military members are some of the smartest and brightest Americans."

Similarly, a 34-year-old male combat veteran with eight years of military experience said service members or veterans are shown, "usually as broken, lower class individuals who are prone towards violence. And once they have completed service the media portrays veterans as needy, lower class citizens who are constantly in need of services. The media constantly portrays service members and veterans as dregs on society."

Excessively heroic portrayal

In contrast to those who feel news reports paint service members in a negative light, some participants ($n = 15$) expressed the view that coverage unnecessarily and problematically glorifies military service members. One 33-year-old male combat veteran who served for four years addressed this theme, saying, "I think our media often paints large populations with a large and somewhat destructive brush. When we deem all veterans as heroes because of their service, we stunt that individual's transition to identity and purpose after the military."

Similarly, a 26-year-old combat veteran with seven years of military experience simply said, "The media over-glorifies service members."

At times, such coverage was seen as coming at the expense of more realistic depictions that show the actual challenges and struggles faced by veterans. A 31-year-old combat veteran with 10 years of military experience said, "They have done a good job showing the return home, but they have done a poor job explaining that the return is only the beginning of a much longer process."

Insufficient coverage

Many other participants ($n = 23$) indicated the viewpoint that service members receive too little attention in news reports.

Said one 30-year-old woman veteran with seven years of military experience, "Media used to report on service members … and it used to be a national celebration. Our nation's soldiers were also written about in a manner that likened them to Grecian soldiers or the Roman legionary. Now, whatever bleeds leads, and it's disparaging for service members to come home and realize that no one wants to hear about the things that service members are putting their lives on the line for."

Discussion

Data gathered in this research demonstrate a widespread dissatisfaction with military-themed reporting among current and former members of the American military. A com-

monly expressed complaint of service members was that they often felt stereotyped and not presented as individuals. As such, it would clearly be inappropriate to suggest that there is any singular or monolithic perspective, or that any one viewpoint could represent a general or dominant military perspective. Nevertheless, the responses gathered in this study do suggest that there are several commonly held viewpoints.

Notably, regarding the first research question, many participants were especially critical of the way news media cover the military overall, or report on military actions. Specifically, many were either (1) critical of news media as a group because of perceived actions or attitudes —such as self-interest, sensationalism, or political bias—or else (2) critical of journalists for glossing over harsh realities or being unwilling to draw attention to negative aspects of warfare and the military. Regarding the second research question, most participants felt that (1) media typically perpetuate a range of negative stereotypes, while others felt that (2) journalists treat service members fairly in news reports. From these broad conclusions, several notable key findings emerged.

Journalism lacks ethical standards

Many of the comments that were critical of journalists centered on the viewpoint that journalists too often operate without a sense of professional ethics. Such comments often suggested that journalists are self-serving or opportunistic, exploit military stories for financial gain, operate as political partisans, or fail to do adequate research. Such criticism should not be dismissed; indeed, such comments speak to broader issues facing contemporary journalism regarding the proliferation of pseudo-news and tabloid-style news, and the fact that even traditionally respected news organizations face increasing pressure and competition. Further, these comments suggest the importance of returning to a stronger sense of journalistic professionalism and objectivity; when such objectivity is lacking, credibility is lost, even among this specific population and regarding such specific topics.

Journalists need to be more critical

There was a strong trend in comments that demonstrated the feeling that reporters do the public a disservice by being too unwilling to take a critical perspective, criticize military policy, or show the destruction of war. Such a perspective is nothing new; scholars have long criticized news media for often adopting a nationalistic or pro-war perspective (Haigh et al., 2006; McGoldrick, 2006; Pfau, Haigh, et al., 2005; Thussu & Freedman, 2003; Tumber & Palmer, 2004). Notably, studies have found that war reporting rarely includes bad news, and that when bad or unflattering news items are reported it is often within a pro-government frame (Entman, 2013).

Yet, it is especially notable to see this perspective expressed by those who serve or have served in the military, including those with long military careers and direct combat experience. Indeed, a clear possibility exists that such service members—many of whom have seen first-hand both the benefits and horrors of war—have a much more visceral reaction to media content that ignores such realities. Existing psychological research shows that combat, and especially combat that results in the use of lethal force (Grossman, 1995; Grossman & Sidle, 2000), has a profound impact on an individual. Accordingly, it is likely that—for at least some veterans, including some represented in this study—a real desire exists for the public at large to better realize the weighty nature of what military service members are asked to do, and then cope with, in the name of their country.

Such perspectives suggest that critical and analytical news coverage can serve to both better inform the country, and also dignify the experience of those who serve in the military by helping to improve public understanding.

Stereotypes are perpetuated

Comments made it apparent that many service members felt that they were stereotyped by news coverage. Most often, participants expressed frustration with stereotypically unflattering portrayals of service members. Yet, other comments also suggested that stereotypically positive depictions of service members—including frequently being framed as heroes—are also unfair to military members and are not accurate or representative. Indeed, it is problematically easy to forget that those who wear a military uniform are not, themselves, uniform people, but instead are individuals with a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, and attitudes. Accordingly, the importance of getting perspectives and comments from a range of individuals, and avoiding the temptation to paint with broad strokes, is highlighted.

This is especially important because when individual experiences are excluded from dominant media frames and depictions, it can have a powerfully negative effect on the way in which individual see themselves. As Cooley (1902) highlighted, just as individuals understand their physical appearance by looking in a mirror, individuals also develop a sense of self and come to understand who they are by considering how they and their peers are reflected by others and, by extension, in media. While data from this study did not explicitly prove a causal link between limited or stereotypical media portrayals and negative perceptions of self, such a connection was certainly suggested when participants used words like "dehumanized" or expressed feeing as though they have been made to "seem as if I am a monster to society." Such indications further highlight the potentially powerful impact that news coverage can have on individual service members and veterans, and emphasizes both the need for journalists to focus carefully on the frames that are created, and for researchers to more fully investigate the effect of media on service members and veterans.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study provided a level of detail regarding the range of viewpoints held by current and former members of the US armed services. Yet, questions remain regarding why indi-

viduals held the opinions that they did. Further research could investigate the reasons behind such attitudes, and specifically consider if such opinions are based on personal experience, or on the particular news sources to which participants were exposed. Additionally, this study focused on the perspectives of military service members and veterans with at least some college education. Because many military service members (18.8% of enlisted personnel and 84.8% of officers) have completed a college-level degree before or during their time of service—and many more start or complete such degrees after leaving the military (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018)—this decision could be considered appropriate (Cate et al., 2017; Department of Defense, 2017; Parker, Cilluffo, & Stepler, 2017; Reynolds & Shendruk, 2018). Nevertheless, the possibility does exist that the immediacy of college or university experiences among this sampled population might affect individual perspectives. As such, future research would benefit from an expanded sample that also included perspectives from individuals without any experience in higher education. Similarly, additional related studies could also consider if, or in what way, the views and attitudes of military service members and veterans are affected by experiences with post-secondary higher education. Finally, findings from this study indicate that some veterans and service members perceive a disconnect between their self-image and their image in news media. Accordingly, future research could move beyond this study, which identified this disconnect, to also consider the specific effects of news coverage on the self identity of service members and veterans.

Conclusion

Military-related reporting serves a valuable purpose in a democratic society and is necessary for an informed citizenry. Considering the perspectives of those who serve in the military sheds light on practices and coverage that can be improved, and suggests that there is a critical need for detailed and careful coverage that better explores the many individual stories of the men and women who serve, and that also points an insightful and detailed light into the harsh realities and consequences of armed conflict.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Contributions

The corresponding author of this manuscript is the only individual who was involved with this research study.

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