

Representations of British Armed Forces Veterans in the Press: A Quantitative Analysis of Newspaper Articles

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Previous research has shown that British public perception of veterans can be negative and erroneous. Surveys, for example, indicate that veterans are characterized as skilled and valorous individuals but also as suffering from ill-health, unemployment, and homelessness. To investigate how these beliefs may form, the present study examines the public dimension of knowledge by analyzing depictions of veterans in the media. A total of 335 newspaper articles that represent British veterans were downloaded from Google News and UKPressonline. After the articles were classified with a content analysis, chi-square tests were conducted to understand how the representation of veterans may be related to the political affiliations of news agencies and by newspaper format. The results suggest that British veterans are predominantly represented in both heroic and victimizing contexts. While political affiliation did not affect the representation of veterans significantly, newspaper format did, with broadsheet (quality) newspapers emphasizing victimized contexts and local and international newspapers focusing on heroic contexts, with tabloids occupying a middle ground. In conclusion, broadsheet newspapers may express socio-cultural scrutiny toward the ways in which veterans are treated, while local and international newspapers may focus on stereotypical representations of

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1. This article is based on Rita Phillips's doctoral thesis, "Understanding and Explaining Perceptions of Veterans in UK Society," which was funded by Oxford Brookes University and defended in 2019.

heroic British military actions that veterans may symbolize. Implications and conclusions are discussed.

Introduction

An essential feature of civil-military relationships is the way the state recognizes the sacrifices of men and women who have served their country once they have left the armed forces (Dandeker et al. 2006). Besides governmental recognition, social perceptions of veterans are important, reflecting an acknowledgment of and appreciation for the contribution of service personnel, who, bound to the “contract of unlimited liability,” are obliged to risk or even lay down their lives in the course of exercising lethal force against the enemy. In addition, the social perceptions of veterans may be particularly important, as these are prevalent in everyday contexts and discourses.

However, research shows that British attitudes toward their veterans may be ambiguous and problematic. For example, public-opinion surveys indicate that the majority of British respondents associate veterans with having developed useful skills, helping them to succeed in their civilian careers, but also with increased risks of experiencing unemployment relative to members of the general population (Ashcroft 2012, 2017; ICM 2012–15). Veterans were also erroneously perceived as being more likely to suffer from homelessness, drug abuse, and physical and psychological health problems or suicidal tendencies than members of the civilian population (MOD 2015, 2018; King’s Centre for Military Health Research 2014; British Social Attitudes 2012; Ipsos MORI and King’s College London 2015; Ashcroft 2012, 2017). Therefore, members of the British public may hold implicit, negative stereotypes toward those who have left the British Armed Forces.

Stereotypes of and negative connotations toward veterans are problematic, as these may have an impact on veterans’ successful reintegration into society. This issue may be of particular relevance for veterans of the most recent missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, as this younger population of veterans may not only face negative stereotypes related to public perceptions of veterans but may also be confronted with negative attitudes toward these specific missions (Gribble et al. 2015; YouGov 2015). In addition, negative public perceptions of veterans may deter recruitment and cause disaffection among those who are currently serving. Therefore, it is surprising that to date little research has examined

factors that contribute to erroneous and negative perceptions of veterans. The present project addresses this gap by examining the public dimension of knowledge.

The public dimension of knowledge describes spaces in which natural, day-to-day discourses about socially relevant matters take place (Jovchelovitch 2001; Dahlgren 1995; Koopmans and Statham 2010). Therefore, the public dimension of knowledge is considered to play an important role in the creation, formation, and acquisition of knowledge about such social realities as “veterans” (Jovchelovitch 2001; Moscovici 1988, 2000; Jodelet 1991). Here, the media is thought to play a particularly important role, since it is *the* modern medium of the public dimension of knowledge (Habermas 1991; Farr 1993). Essentially, the media is considered to offer a symbolic space for disputing opinions and thus challenging and reconceptualizing knowledge about social realities by initiating public dialogues (Jovchelovitch 2001; Habermas 1991; Farr 1993). In doing so, the media connects the personal lives of individuals to others through promoting discourses about socially relevant realities, constructing a chain of culturally shared and recognized experiences about social realities (Beardsworth 1980; Habermas 1991; Jovchelovitch 2001). Therefore, it is unsurprising that previous research has produced extensive evidence that describes the profound impact of the media on individual and public opinions in areas such as health behaviors, perceptions of asylum seekers, HIV/AIDS, and so forth (Lido et al. 2006; Dietrich et al. 2006; Lupton 2013; Beharrell 1993; Berridge 1991; Cliff and Stears 1989; Wellings 1988; Watney 1987; Pratt 1986). In conclusion, as the media may form, foster, and transform individual and public opinions of social realities, it may also influence perceptions of veterans.

In transposing depictions of social realities, the media is inspired by social actors and institutions (Jovchelovitch 2001; Habermas 1991; Farr 1993). Such actors and institutions could be, for example, charities that rely on depictions of veterans as victims to promote charitable campaigns, politicians who in expressing their honor and appreciation for veterans seek to win the general public’s favor, or veterans themselves by accomplishing extraordinary or attention-provoking acts (McCartney 2011). Additionally, media may become a social actor itself by pursuing its own interests (e.g., increasing newspaper sales) (Jovchelovitch 2001). Here, particular political agendas may be noteworthy, as previous research indicates that newspapers’ political affiliations (Labour/center-left/left-wing; Conservative/center-right/right-wing; or no political affiliation) have an impact on how the same content is represented (see, e.g.,

Brandenburg 2002; Semetko et al. 2013; Curran and Seaton 2002; Rooney 2000; Gekoski, Gray, and Adler 2012; Moore, Mason, and Lewis 2008; Carvalho and Burgess 2005; Sparks and Tulloch 2000).

This notion may be particularly important for the depictions of veterans, as decisions surrounding deployment and the use of the military are often highly politicized and controversial (Bland 1999). More concretely, depictions of veterans in newspaper articles may be influenced by the extent to which the country's current foreign policies follow a news outlet's party affiliation. Here, the two most recent interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan may play a special role. As both of these controversial British deployments happened under the Labour-led governments of Tony Blair, it may be argued that Labour-affiliated news outlets might depict veterans more favorably than Conservative-affiliated ones (YouGov 2015). In conclusion, if a newspaper supports the most recent deployments for political reasons, veterans of these deployments may be more likely to be depicted as heroes. This may reflect culturally pertinent associations between veterans and heroic sentiments.

Studies on rhetorical functions outline a cultural assumption that relates military service to heroism located in discursive descriptions of dichotomies (Gibson 2012; Gibson and Condor 2009; Coy, Woehrlé, and Maney 2008). Gibson (2012) argues that military service is culturally conceptualized in terms of performing a solemn function. However, while veterans in this context may be conceptualized as solemn people, veterans may be seen less solemnly if the mission is less appreciated. Therefore, if a newspaper did not support the most recent deployments, veterans may be predominantly represented as suffering from the consequences of a futile war. Here, psychological injury may be a key theme, as research indicates that the more a society perceives veterans to have fought in illegitimate warfare, the more veterans are represented in the context of suffering from PTSD and trauma (McGarry 2012). While socially appreciated missions (e.g., World Wars I and II) may also draw attention to the veteran as suffering from the effects of war, the social focus shifts slightly in the context of ill-conceived missions (Goldensohn 2006). There the social focus rests almost exclusively on the veteran's horrific experiences on the battlefield (De Groot 1995; Chattarji 2000; Goldensohn 2006). From this perspective, the veteran's experience may be conceptualized as requiring public empathy and pity, as conceptualizations of the veteran may overlap with definitions of victims in a victimological context (McGarry 2012).

In addition to the political affiliation of newspapers, economic decisions may influence depictions of veterans in the media. Here, differences in readership and newspaper quality need to be taken into consideration (Gekoski, Gray, and Adler 2012; Moore, Mason, and Lewis 2008; Carvalho and Burgess 2005). The UK newspaper landscape consists of the text-focused, higher-quality “broadsheet” press (e.g., *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Daily Telegraph*) and the right- and left-wing mid-market image-led popular “tabloid” press (e.g., *The Sun*, *Daily Mail*) (Rooney 2000; Boykoff and Mansfield 2008; Carvalho and Burgess 2005). While the majority of the readership of the former are well educated and belong to the white-collar social class (Ipsos MORI 2005), the tabloids are typically considered “working class” newspapers (Boykoff and Mansfield 2008; Ipsos MORI 2005). In conclusion, major newspapers and tabloids may also differ in how veterans are being depicted. As the major newspaper press is characterized by presenting thoroughly argued analyses of information, it may also discuss relevant issues that affect the veteran community—for example, the social/governmental care for veterans or veterans’ position in society. In this sense, it may focus on depictions of veterans as victims. In contrast, tabloids, which are characterized by an oversimplification of social issues and the avoidance of abstract or general reasoning, may be driven by sales. This may prevent them from following a singular perspective, such as focusing on social issues affecting the veteran (Rooney 2000). Instead, veterans may be represented in any way and in any context that promotes sales, such as heroizing *and* victimizing sentiments.

In addition to the broadsheets and tabloids, the media landscape in Britain includes local newspapers. These are most often locally owned, presenting social issues and discourses from a local perspective that have a direct appeal to readers within the circulation area (Williams 1998). As a result, local newspapers may depict aspects of veterans that are relevant to individuals in that region. Therefore, it may be possible that the local press may focus on depictions of veterans as heroes, as local groups commonly refer to “their” veterans when claiming recognition and respect (Gibson 2012). In the same way, the local press may utilize a culturally perpetuated veteran-hero assumption (Gibson 2012) to claim appreciation for the local region.

Similar to local newspaper articles, international newspaper articles that are accessible in the UK may represent veterans predominantly in the context of heroizing sentiments. This could be the case because

the international press may focus on a culture-external perspective, reflecting on British societal myths that are expressed in “constitutional charters” (Liu and Hilton 2005, 538). The constitutional charter of being (together with the United States) “world policemen . . . institutionalised through their permanent seats on the U.N Security Council” may therefore influence international depictions of veterans and justify depicting UK veterans as heroes.

To date, a comprehensive study of depictions of veterans in the press has not been undertaken. The present study will address this research gap by examining (a) how veterans are depicted in newspaper reports that are accessible in the UK, (b) the impact of the newspaper agencies’ political affiliations on depictions of veterans, and (c) the impact of newspaper type (broadsheet, tabloid, local, international) on depictions of veterans. The present study therefore contributes to an understanding of public opinions and (mis)beliefs about veterans by examining the public dimension of knowledge, operationalized through media (Jovchlovitch 2001).

Methods

Literature Search and Sample

Research indicates that the overall readership and significance of printed news is steadily decreasing while the consumption of online news is on the rise (OfCom 2017; Statista 2017, 2018). Therefore, the present study’s literature search focused on online news by reference searching in the databases Google News and UKPressonline. The database Google News² was selected as it is a widely distributed, free and easily accessible news aggregator (also available as an App). In contrast, the database UKPressonline³ is a professional online research facility that requires a subscription. It contains archives of the most influential UK newspapers (such as the *Daily Mail*, *The Telegraph*, and *The Independent*). UKPressonline was therefore used as “backup” to access articles about veterans that may not have been covered by Google News due to copyright issues (Xalabarder 2012).

2. <http://news.google.com>.

3. <http://www.ukpressonline.co.uk>.

As the newspaper analysis was an initial attempt to grasp a broad picture of veterans' depictions in the news, a variety of search terms were utilized. Articles were selected and downloaded that referred in the headline and/or subtitle to a combination of the following search terms: "Veterans"/"veterans" and "UK"/"British"/"Britain"/"Scottish"/"Scotland"/"English"/"England"/"Ulster"/"Northern Ireland"/"Welsh"/"Wales". To ensure the recency of veteran depictions, the timeframe was limited to articles published after May 22, 2011 (the day of the last British soldier's withdrawal from Iraq) and before February 2, 2018. This timeframe was selected as it allowed a broader depiction of veterans. For example, media may have depicted soldiers from the most recent missions in Iraq or Afghanistan as veterans, even if they remained in the British Armed Forces. Therefore, potential depictions of veterans as a young, fit, and healthy population (as being veterans solely from these deployments) could be included. This consideration followed the intention to examine depictions of a general veteran population. In this sense, media definitions of veterans were not scrutinized.

From the databases a total of 335 articles were identified that included a combination of the search terms in the headline/subtitle and were published within the stipulated timeframe. Of these 335 articles, 284 (85 percent) were drawn from the online news aggregator Google News and 51 (15 percent) from the online print-press archive UKPressonline. However, it should be noted that newspaper articles were commonly accessible through Google News *and* UKPressonline, as being published in both online and print form. This explains the low number of articles drawn from UKPressonline, as this archive was searched after the Google News search had been concluded. Articles that were available in both archives were not counted or downloaded twice. It was hypothesized that individuals would not read the same article twice, even if accessible in different forms.

An overview of the number of articles grouped by political affiliation (McNair 2017; Wodak, KhosraviNik, and Mral 2013; Brandenburg 2002; Hesmondhalgh 2005) and newspaper format can be found in Table 1. Articles that were drawn from international and smaller local news agencies (European Journalism Observatory 2011; Smith and Joffe 2009; Gabrielatos and Baker 2008; Tunstall 1996) were labeled as "international" and "local."

Table 1. Overview of Newspapers That Published Articles about Veterans, Format, and Political Affiliation

Political Affiliation [Newspaper Name]	Newspaper Format	News Agencies	Total Number of Veteran- Related Articles [Proportion of Total Articles]
Center-right/Right-wing [<i>The Times, The Telegraph</i>]	Broadsheet	News UK, Telegraph Group (Barclay Brothers)	29 [8.7%]
Center-left/Left-wing [<i>The Guardian</i>]	Broadsheet	Guardian Media Group (Scott Trust)	45 [13.4%]
None/Other [BBC, <i>The Independent</i> , ITV, Sky News, <i>Business Insider</i>]	Broadsheet	Statutory Cooperation, Novaya Gazeta, ITV studios, Sky plc, Axel Springer SE	93 [27.8%]
Center-right/Right-wing [<i>Daily Mail, Express</i> , <i>The Sun, Evening Standard, Scottish Sun</i> , <i>Daily Star, Metro</i> , <i>The Mail</i>]	Tabloid	Daily Mail and General Trust, Northern and Shell Media, News International (Rupert Murdoch), Evgeny Lebev, DMGT	58 [17.3%]
Center-left/Left-wing [<i>Daily Record, The Mirror</i> , <i>Daily Opinion</i> , <i>The Canary</i>]	Tabloid	Trinity Mirror plc, Independent Media	35 [10.4%]
None/Other [<i>The Newsletter</i> , <i>CommonSpace, Deadline News, Diss Express, Free Press, Evening Times</i>]	Tabloid	Johnston Press, Common Weal Deadline Press, Johnston Press, Newsquest Media Group	7 [2.0%]
Center-right/Right-wing [<i>Yorkshire Post</i>]	Local	Yorkshire Post Newspapers	1 [0.3%]
Center-left/Left-wing [<i>Wales Online, Western Mail, Liverpool Echo</i> , <i>The News, Bristol Post</i> , <i>East London & Wessex Guardian, Arianna Huffington, Leicester Mercury</i>]	Local	Trinity Mirror plc. Derby Telegraph, Trinity Mirror plc, Fitzpatrick Family, Reach plc, Guardian Media Group (Scott Trust), Huffington Post	19 [5.7%]

Table 1. Continued

Political Affiliation [Newspaper Name]	Newspaper Format	News Agencies	Total Number of Veteran- Related Articles [Proportion of Total Articles]
Other local newspapers None/Other [<i>Lancashire Telegraph</i> , <i>Lancashire Post</i> , <i>The Scotsman</i> , <i>The Third Force</i> , <i>South Wales Argus</i> , <i>The Blackpool Gazette</i> , <i>Banbury Guardian</i> , <i>Belfast Newsletter</i> , <i>Bucks Herald</i> , <i>Evesham Journal</i> , <i>Linlithgow Gazette</i> , <i>Penarth Times</i> , <i>Northern Ireland News</i> , <i>Richmondshire Today</i> , ICNN, Scottish Housing Scottish News Agency, <i>The News Portsmouth</i> , <i>Belfast Telegraph</i>]	Local	Newsquest Media Group Ltd., Johnston Press, Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, NewsNet Ltd, Dundee Press Agency Ltd T/A, Independent News & Media plc	19 [5.7%]
International newspapers [<i>Irish Central</i> , <i>Games Radar</i> , <i>Irish Times</i> , <i>Kotaku</i> , <i>Leinster Express</i> , <i>Lifestyle New York</i> , <i>New York Daily News</i> , <i>New York Times</i> , <i>People</i> , RT, RTE, <i>The Packet</i> , <i>Vice</i> , CBC, CRN]	International	International	29 [8.7%]

Content Analysis

To categorize the newspaper articles, the present project utilized content analysis (CA). CA is used extensively for media analysis (Morant 1998; Jovchelovitch 2001; Schmitz, Filippone, and Edelman 2003; Washer and Joffe 2006; Joffe 2012). Bauer and Gaskell (2010, 132) characterize it as “the only method of text analysis that has been developed within the empirical social sciences.” CA is considered to be a “technique

for making inferences by systemically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages" (Holsti 1969, 601). This means more concretely that CA converts specific features of texts (i.e., "kinds," "qualities," "distinctions") into numerical descriptions.

To derive numerical descriptions, reoccurring themes were developed and defined. Fifty randomly selected articles were deconstructed, simplified (to find the underlying meaning), and reconstructed (to verify assumptions about underlying meanings). This process was accompanied by two research associates. At first, the articles indicated that a general distinction between veteran-hero, veteran-victim, veteran-perpetrator, and veteran-other depictions could be drawn. By deconstructing the fifty articles to determine the overriding theme, each article was allocated to one category. For example, articles that depicted and thematized veterans as suffering victims from deployment-related injuries after having acted heroically during their deployment were categorized into the veteran-victim category, as this was the article's central theme. This general distinction between "hero," "victim," "perpetrator," and "other" category was clear-cut and unambiguous. An initial codebook was generated in that category, memberships were defined, and examples for each category were provided (Table 2). Interrater reliability was checked with one discipline-external rater, who categorized 25 percent of randomly selected articles (85 articles from the total of 335 articles). Interrater reliability was found to be sufficiently validated, as 92.35 percent of the articles were correctly categorized. An overview of category frequency in relation to newspaper format and political affiliation can be found in Table 3.

Chi-Square Analysis

To understand a potential relationship between category and newspaper format/political affiliation, bivariate analyses (chi-square tests), a frequently used method in the analysis of media content, were undertaken (Zaharopoulos 1990; Barlow, Barlow, and Chiricos 1995; Golan and Wanta 2001; Devitt 2002). Chi-square tests are constructed from the sum of squared errors or through the sample variance, and they determine whether there are significant differences between the expected frequencies and the observed frequencies in different categories (Greenwood and Nikulin 1996). Therefore, chi-square tests allow us to observe whether ways in which veterans are depicted in newspaper articles differ between newspaper formats (broadsheet, tabloid, international, local)

Table 2. Codebook for the Categorization of Newspaper Articles

Category	Definition	Example
Victim	<p>General message: Veterans need help and empathy, veterans are worthy of pity</p> <p>Veterans suffer from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —physical and/or psychological disabilities —social discrimination —governmental callousness —institutional neglect —lack of care 	<p>Lusher, A. (2016, August, 21). Payouts to UK veterans with mental health disorders reach record levels. <i>Independent</i></p>
Hero	<p>General message: Veterans are worthy of honor and respect.</p> <p>Veterans are to be honored for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —heroic deeds in the past (e.g., protection of UK population) —heroic deeds in the present (e.g., collecting money, offering help for other veterans with disabilities) —heroically overcoming psychological and/or physical disorders (e.g., climbing Mount Everest with prosthetic limbs) 	<p>Blackstone, G. (2016, September, 4). Top French honor for two Scottish World War II heroes, <i>Sunday Post</i></p>
Perpetrator	<p>General message: Veterans are brutal, evil perpetrators who do harm to a peace-loving society</p> <p>Veterans are to be disliked for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> —Doing harm to civilians —Having antisocial attitudes and behaviors 	<p>Bodman, M. (2017, November 14). Ex-navy officer Charles Howeson “groped men on ship,” <i>BBC</i></p>
Other	<p>Any other theme, e.g., Veterans vote against Brexit</p>	<p>Mortimer, C. (2016, May 9). EU referendum: World War II veterans come out against Brexit. <i>Independent</i></p>

and the political affiliation of news agencies (left-wing, right-wing, none, and for comparison, international). Statistically significant chi-square tests would suggest that the ways in which veterans are depicted differ significantly between newspaper formats and/or between political affiliations of news agencies. In contrast, nonsignificant chi-square tests would indicate that veterans are depicted similarly across newspaper formats and/or political affiliations of news agencies.

Table 3. Overview of Themes, Newspaper Format, and Political Affiliation

	Newspaper Specifications	Number of Articles: Veteran-Victim (Online Press) [Print Press]	Number of Articles: Veteran-Hero (Online Press) [Print Press]	Number of Articles: Veteran-Perpetrator (Online Press) [Print Press]	Number of Articles: Veteran-Other (Online Press) [Print Press]	
All	All news agencies	166 (142) [24]	143 (120) [23]	15 (13) [2]	11 (9) [3]	
	Newspaper Format	Broadsheet	92 (72) [20]	57 (44) [13]	8 [6] (2)	5 [4] (1)
		Tabloid	49 (45) [4]	42 (32) [10]	6 [5] (1)	3 [2] (1)
		International	6 (6) [0]	13 (13) [0]	0 (0) [0]	0 [0] (0)
Local		19 (19) [0]	31 (31) [0]	1 (1) [0]	3 (2) [1]	
Political Affiliation	Left: Left-wing; Center-left	54 (43) [11]	35 (27) [8]	5 (3) [2]	3 (3) [0]	
	Right: Right-wing; Center-right	43 (37) [6]	42 (36) [6]	3 (3) [0]	4 (3) [1]	
	None	63 (56) [7]	53 (44) [9]	7 (6) [1]	4 (2) [2]	
	International	6 (6) [0]	13 (13) [0]	0 (0) [0]	0 (0) [0]	

Results

Chi-Square Test

Before the chi-square tests were conducted, careful consideration regarding the statistical value of the categories “perpetrator” and “other” were made. As each category comprised less than 5 percent (“perpetrator”: 4.5 percent; “other”: 3.3 percent) of the 335 articles, it was decided to exclude the “perpetrator” and “other” categories from the subsequent analyses. Although we do not suggest that the prevalence of articles may equate with salience in the public mind, the low number of articles may suggest an absence of public discourse that thematizes veterans in relation to these themes. Additionally, the exclusion of the categories “perpetrator” and “other” contributed to statistically valid, concise chi-square test models.

A total of 309 newspaper articles that depicted the veteran as “hero” or “victim” remained, after excluding articles from the “perpetrator” or “other” category. The chi-square test included the variables “newspaper format” with four categories (“broadsheet,” “tabloid,” “international,” “local”), “theme” with two categories (“hero,” “victim”), and “political affiliation” with four categories (“left,” “right,” “none,” “international”). Assumptions of the chi-square test were met, as variables were categorical, the independence of observations was established (no relationship between the cases), and the data were mutually exclusive (articles were categorized into no more than one category). Moreover, the data were found to be appropriately distributed, as 0 cells (0 percent) had an expected count of fewer than five cases in each categorical variable group for both chi-square tests—“category vs. political affiliation” and “category vs. newspaper format.”

A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the occurrences of “theme” (“hero,” “victim”) and political affiliation of newspapers (“left,” “right,” “none,” “international”). No significant association was found between the two variables ($\chi^2(3, N = 309) = 3.71, p = 0.295$). It may be concluded that depictions of veterans as heroes or victims do not stand in a statistically significant relationship with political affiliations of news agencies.

A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the occurrence of “hero” and “victim” category with broadsheet, tabloid, international, and local newspaper formats. A significant association was found, indicating that “broadsheet,” “tabloid,” “international,” and “local”

newspaper formats report in significantly different proportions on the veteran as “hero” and “victim” ($\chi^2 (3, N = 309) = 12.58, p = 0.006$) with a small significant effect size ($\Phi = 0.20, p = 0.006$). The analysis indicated that while the broadsheet press focuses predominantly on the veteran-victim depiction (hero: 38.3 percent; victim: 61.7 percent), depictions of veterans as heroes are predominant in international (hero: 68.4, victim: 31.6) and local press (hero: 62 percent; victim: 38 percent). Tabloids depict veterans as heroes and victims in comparable proportions (hero: 46.2 percent; victim: 53.8 percent).

Post hoc pairwise comparisons (MacDonald and Gardner 2000) with Bonferroni correction ($p = 0.073$) revealed a significant difference in frequency of “hero-victim” depictions in two instances: broadsheet newspapers differed significantly from the international press ($\chi^2 (1, N = 168) = 6.31, p = 0.012; \Phi = 0.19, p = 0.012$) and from the local press ($\chi^2 (1, N = 199) = 8.56, p = 0.003; \Phi = 0.21, p = 0.003$). Post hoc pairwise comparisons indicated no significant differences between broadsheet and tabloid ($\chi^2 (1, N = 240) = 1.45, p = 0.228$), tabloid and international press ($\chi^2 (1, N = 110) = 3.25, p = 0.077$), tabloid and local press ($\chi^2 (1, N = 141) = 3.25, p = 0.072$), and international and local press ($\chi^2 (1, N = 69) = 0.25, p = 0.620$). In conclusion, post hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni corrections show that the previous descriptive comparison between veteran-victim and veteran-hero report coverage in percentages was significant.

Discussion

The present findings suggest well-established, socially distributed connections between veterans and heroizing sentiments and veterans and victimizing sentiments. However, while the political affiliations of news agencies did not significantly affect the ways in which veterans were represented, newspaper format did. While the broadsheet press focused predominantly on depictions of veterans in victimized ways, the local and international press emphasized heroic depictions of veterans. The tabloid press did not differ significantly from any newspaper format and so may depict veterans in an “anything goes” fashion—as both heroes and victims.

Media distributions of veterans resonate with theoretical notions of “constructing military service as . . . solemn function” that legitimizes the “cultural assumptions regarding a category of persons who . . . deserve to be treated with more respect” (Gibson 2012, 145; see also Coy,

Woehrle, and Maney 2008; Gibson and Condor 2009). On the other hand, media distributions resonate with theoretical notions of veterans as “victims . . . who are involved in a conflict [and] become injured or killed as a result” (Gibson 2012, 135; see also De Groot 1995; Goldensohn 2006; Chattarji 2000; McGarry 2012). Therefore, factually incorrect beliefs that experiencing war may be emotionally and/or physiologically damaging (cf. Connelly and Burgess 2013; MOD 2016) were found to be mirrored by depictions of veterans in the press.

Moreover, the findings from the present study suggest that political affiliation of newspaper agencies (left, right, none, and for comparative purposes, international) may not affect the way in which content is represented. While previous studies indicate that the political affiliations of newspapers affect media coverage in other areas—such as reports concerning the government and politicians (e.g., Brandenburg 2002; Semetko et al. 2013; Negrine 2003; Curran and Seaton 2002)—the present results suggest that depictions of veterans are less tied to political affiliations. Therefore, the present study does not support the notion that depictions of the military and its members may be tainted by newspapers’ party affiliations and by the extent to which these affiliations may be aligned with current foreign policies.

However, in contrast to the lack of a relationship between the news outlets’ political affiliations, newspaper format (broadsheet, tabloid, local, and international) was found to significantly affect how veterans are depicted. The culture-external perspective that the international press may take may explain the predominance of its depictions of British veterans as heroes. As previously stated in this article, focusing on evaluations and representations of British “constitutional charters” (Liu and Hilton 2005, 538), the international press may represent the British as world policemen and thereby depict British veterans as heroes. However, as also noted above, this finding may have been influenced by the fact that the international newspaper articles included in this study were drawn from Anglo-Saxon countries which themselves had cooperated in military missions with the British.

The macro level of culture-external perspectives that the international media is forced to take may scratch the surface of stereotypical representations of British military actions that veterans may symbolize. In contrast, significantly increased depictions of veterans as heroes in local newspaper formats may relate to the micro level of local perspectives. These local perspectives may focus on promoting appreciation for the region by transposing appreciation for veterans onto the local region (see

Gibson 2012; Gibson and Condor 2009; Coy, Woehrle, and Maney 2008). This may help attach an extraordinary character or heroic sentiment to the local region (Gibson 2012). This argument may also explain why the tabloid press does not significantly differ from local formats in their proportion of veteran-hero depictions. On a national level, it may be argued that the appreciation for British veterans may reflect an appreciation for the British national identity and thus recognition for the British individual's national identity.

In contrast, significantly higher proportions of veteran-victim depictions in the national broadsheet press may represent intracultural discourses. These discourses may reflect sociocultural scrutiny toward the cost of war and may challenge social responses toward veterans' sufferings. The dominance of veteran-victim representation in the broadsheet press may reflect the role of the press as a social agent that reconceptualizes culturally determined taken-for-granted by discussing ambivalent relations between critically minded citizens and British politics (Jovchelovitch 2001). Therefore, the broadsheet press may be considered as representing a symbolic space for disputing contradictory and dichotomous arguments and perspectives of various social actors, in contrast to debates that are excessively simplified or excluded in other media (Jovchelovitch 2001). In this sense, the predominance of veteran-victim depictions in broadsheet newspapers may be the result of more critical, nuanced, and detailed analyses in matters of social life. However, this notion may not be true for the tabloid press. Although the tabloid press did not differ from the broadsheet press in reporting on veterans as victims, the tabloid press may focus on increasing their sales and attracting a higher readership and so depict veterans as victims and heroes (Rooney 2000).

The present study, however, was limited by sampling and analytical procedures. Although it was able to provide objective and generalizable information, further research in this area may need to consider a separation of veteran types. While this study intended to provide a general and broad snapshot of veteran-related media depictions, future studies may investigate representations of veterans from specific deployments. In this sense, observations of specific interactions between hero/victim category and veteran type may be taken up by future research. As this study was exploratory and utilized a category-based content analysis, future studies may also consider conducting a textual content analysis. In this sense, lexical contents and sentence structures could be investigated to examine other factors—for example, specific veteran-related bywords (e.g., hero/heroic; poor/suffering) and their frequency.

Another limitation concerns the inclusion of articles, as the media definitions of “veteran” remain unquestioned. The inclusion criterion of articles referring to a British veteran in the title or subtitle may need to be further refined in order to allow a more critical adoption of newspaper articles. For example, it may be beneficial to include only articles that refer to one British veteran individual. This would legitimize the exclusion of articles describing predominantly charitable organizations that help a general veteran population. Therefore, subsequent analyses may be more concise and may more clearly differentiate between veteran types (e.g., World War II veteran, Iraq veteran).

The present study did not take potential differences in the news outlets’ impact on social attitudes into account. However, to date, the question of how different British news agencies differ in terms of their impact on public attitudes remains unaddressed. Although it is known that tabloids have a greater readership and a higher circulation, it is also known that the readership of broadsheet newspapers is more influential and thus may be a more powerful group in terms of policy making (Rooney 2000).

In conclusion, the present study’s main limitations may be considered to follow its explorative nature. Future researchers may wish to build upon the present findings to delve into more nuanced and specific aspects of veteran-related depictions. However, though these limitations need to be considered, the present study fulfilled its intention: an overview of common ways in which British veterans are depicted in the media was provided, and differences between veteran depictions and the newspaper format and political affiliation of news agencies were investigated.

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