



Engagement, Not Enragement Bridging the Military-Civilian Divide and Bolstering National Security by Holding the Powerful to Account with More Rigorous, Solutions-Focused Journalism

By David Chrisinger, Ellie Vorhaben, and Graham Harwood

Consumers of military-related journalism present an interesting paradox to media outlets, according to a survey of more than 300 readers of *The War Horse*, a nonprofit newsroom founded in 2016 to report on the human impact of military service. On the one hand, this highly selective group of readers say they want newsrooms to publish stories that hold the powerful to account for misdeeds. On the other hand, they believe that negative (i.e., partisan) stories about the military and those who have served leads to stereotypical views that not only contribute to the ever-widening military-civilian divide but may also threaten national security.

To put it another way: Readers want to be engaged—not enraged.

In addition to military service members, veterans, and their families, the readers who completed *The War Horse* survey include leaders in academia, public policy, and national security; journalists who cover the military and/or veteran affairs; and experts in health care, workforce development, and other military family and veteran-related issues. Taken together, their thoughtful responses reveal the perils of underreporting on the military.

One way to help bridge the gap that divides the military from the public, according to the survey results, is for media outlets—regardless of size and reach—to rededicate themselves to reporting stories that center people without losing sight of the systemic challenges and institutional limitations that contribute to a variety of challenges facing the United States, its military, and those who served in the latter to protect and defend the former.

There are no simple fixes for the challenges laid out in this white paper. They are complicated and long-standing, and no one can fix them alone. Like all such wicked challenges, the remedies only begin to present themselves once key stakeholders, both internally and externally, find productive ways to share their views and collaborate on the best path forward. We believe that what follows is an important step in setting the stage for critical conversations that need to be had if journalists ever expect to use their words to better serve the public’s best interests.



Key Finding 1:

Underreporting on Military and Veteran Affairs Leads to Stereotypical Views That Widen the Military-Civilian Divide and Threaten National Security.

Select Responses from the Survey:

- “Service members have unique and challenging experiences that tend to isolate them from their civilian counterparts. Coverage helps explain what they do, why it matters, and what challenges they face as a result of their service.”
- “At its worst, the lack of coverage is leading to an increased civ-mil divide that is dangerous when transitioning service members don’t feel like they fit in and civilians don’t know how to connect/hire/support them.”
- “Much reporting bolsters negative stereotypes—broken warrior, aggressive warrior. Hero-type reporting—though it increases immediate support—sets unfair expectations and leads to the sense of the ‘other,’ not like us.”

The relatively little news coverage military-related topics receive in the United States has contributed to a widening divide between those affiliated with the military and the broader American public. Sixty-five percent of respondents, in fact, reported that the current media landscape has widened the military-civilian divide, with another 9% of respondents who claimed the media wholly ignores military families and veterans. When asked about the impact of such coverage (or lack thereof) on military families and veterans, nearly 40% of respondents reported that media coverage has generally had a decidedly negative impact, though it’s not clear from the survey results exactly how his impact has manifested. About half as many (22%) described the impact such coverage has as generally positive. At the same time, 64% of readers said the current media landscape poorly serves or does not at all serve the military-affiliated community. Perhaps most concerning for journalists searching for stories, 45% of survey respondents said they were not comfortable discussing issues that impact military service members, veterans, and their families with the media.

Over the past several years, media outlets that focused on military-related topics have been decimated by sweeping cuts—or were threatened with defunding, as was the case with *Stars and Stripes* in 2020. In that same year, *The New York Times*, one of the most profitable media outlets in the world, discontinued its At War Blog, a project that provided original reporting and firsthand accounts of conflict from around the world. At a time when only 7% of American adults have ever served in the military, and when the U.S. government spends nearly \$1 trillion on defense and



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
**HARRIS SCHOOL
OF PUBLIC POLICY**

veterans' affairs annually—more than double what is spent on civilian health care, education, infrastructure, and diplomacy combined—the American public would be better able to understand the implications of the news by reporting that explains what is happening, why, and to what effect. Reviving the military beat across the nation's newsrooms will undoubtedly help restore faith in military journalism—and the military itself—while also ensuring that those who served receive the support they need and deserve.

In addition to believing that underreporting of military-related issues widens the military-civilian divide, most survey respondents said that in-depth reporting on national defense is essential to national security. The Department of Defense agrees. In 2019, the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness told the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service that “a widening military-civilian divide increasingly impacts our ability to effectively recruit and sustain the force.” Characterized by a lack of awareness and understanding, this disconnection “threatens our ability to recruit the number of quality youth with the needed skill sets to maintain our advantage over any near-peer competitor.” It should come as no surprise, then, when the results of a [General Social Survey](#) (GSS) show that the percentage of Republicans who had a “great deal” of confidence in the military had shrunk from 77% in 2018 to 62% in 2020. For Democrats, the results were equally concerning. The percentage of Democrats who had a great deal of confidence in the military dropped from 52% to 37%.

Despite pervasive narratives of the mainstream media being controlled by untrustworthy rich and powerful elites, respondents to the survey reported that where a newsroom receives its funding matters less than other areas of concern. What matters more, they reported, was how credible the reporting is and how it is presented aesthetically. When asked what newsroom practices decrease their feelings of trust, readers specifically cited poor quality, including grammar and spelling errors, outdated website/tech, and poor user experience, followed by professionalism, meaning media coverage that included factual errors and conjecture and poor or biased sourcing. These results may be partially explained by the mental model many digital news consumers have adopted in the 21st century—that they should be able to access digital news for free. Readers may, as a result, be less concerned with how good reporting is funded than they are with the quality of the final product.

If nonprofit newsrooms need to choose between spending on the promotion of their funding sources or investing in better reporting, the survey results suggest a newsroom's focus should be on producing the best-quality journalism it can, presented in a user-friendly way, so that readers can easily find the high-quality reporting they need. While disclosing the sources of a newsroom's funding remains an important act for transparency's sake, it can perhaps be relegated to the web equivalent of a back page where those who may be interested in that information can access it.



Key Finding 2:

Readers Want the Truth, and They Want to Trust the Media. But They Don't. And They Disagree About Why.

Select Responses from the Survey:

- “I think more personal stories NEED TO be told for so many different reasons.”
- “Communicate the truth.”
- “Provide factual information and no hint of speculation or politics.”
- “Telling the stories of what military and post-military life is really like, along with factual data.”
- “Positive and TRUTHFUL content.”

The views survey respondents expressed about the media in general and military-related coverage in particular show how important trust is to quality journalism. A single slipup, no matter how seemingly benign, can be all it takes to destroy trust that took years to build. Regaining that trust, if possible, could take even more time. For newsrooms like The War Horse that focus on providing media coverage for veterans and their families *produced by* veterans and their families, the challenge isn't quite so insurmountable. This heterogeneous and highly engaged selection of readers said they trust military-focused newsrooms much more than traditional media outlets to cover military-related issues, with 87% reporting that such newsrooms at least adequately or somewhat serve the military-affiliated community. The War Horse enjoys an even higher level of trust with its readers, 98% of whom said they were satisfied or mostly satisfied with its reporting. On this point, military-focused newsrooms can hold their collective heads high.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the media at large. More than half of respondents said they have no or very little trust in the current media landscape to accurately cover the issues affecting military service members, veterans, and their families. This finding should not surprise considering it mirrors a long-term trend of declining trust in media *in general*. According to GSS, the percentage of Americans who had “hardly any” trust in the media doubled from 25% in 1990 to 50% in 2021. Also in 2021, a poll conducted by the nonpartisan Public Agenda showed an equally troubling result: A mere 17% of Americans see the media as playing a constructive role in public discussion and debate, regardless of topic.

Hope is not lost, however—especially when regaining readers' trust. As evidenced by many open-ended survey responses, direct interaction between journalists and the military-affiliated community at all levels can help develop trust and improve the resulting media coverage. Journalists can learn



more about what their readers need and build relationships to bolster trust through a variety of outreach efforts. Readers of *The War Horse* were particularly enthusiastic about the training seminars it provides to military-connected writers and how much the newsroom dedicates to publishing reflections and articles about veterans helping veterans.

Ensuring that media outlets have at least one reporter covering the military and veteran beat could also lead to greater levels of trust. Military-affiliated journalists can add tremendous value to their readers by covering topics sometimes overlooked by the 24-hour news cycle—everything from providing information on how veterans and their families can access benefits and resources, to guides on how readers and fellow journalists can access government data.

Other resources that newsrooms could avail themselves of can be found through organizations like:

- Military Veterans in Journalism, which works to build community for veterans, support their career growth in journalism, and advocate for diversifying newsrooms through hiring and promoting more veterans.
- Military Reporters and Editors Association, which advances the public’s understanding of the military, national security, and homeland defense; educates and shares information with its members and the public on best practices, tools, and techniques for such coverage; represents the interests of working journalists to the government and military; and assures that journalists have access to places where the U.S. military and its allies operate.
- Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, which provides journalists around the world with the resources necessary to produce informed, innovative, and ethical news reporting on violence, conflict, and tragedy.
- The Project for Media and National Security, which works to deepen public understanding of important, often complex national security issues.

Key Finding 3:

Readers Want Newsrooms to Hold the Powerful to Account Without Reinforcing Harmful Stereotypes or Scapegoating Individuals.

Select Responses from the Survey:

- “Provide personal insight on the veteran experience. Reduce stories that continue to stereotype/perpetuate veteran trope.”
- “Biased reporting often increases stereotypes of the veteran as a villain, victim or hero.”



- “Lacking in serious evidence, highlighting only problems without solutions, repetitive stories that have no changes.”
- “I think it’d be helpful to connect military writers/journalists with nonmilitary writers/journalists.”
- “Educate us veterans on how to create exposure which gives us a new mission to continue serving.”

Most readers who completed the survey believe the most critical role newsrooms can play is to hold the powerful to account for malfeasance and misconduct. This desire for accountability can seem incongruent, however, with some of their responses to open-ended questions calling for more positive stories about the military and those affiliated with it.

Accountability journalism must, by its nature, be negative in that it shines a bright beam of light on something that isn’t working in order to find out who or what is responsible for the gap between what is happening and what we want to happen. Human-interest reportage that details something positive has its place in the media ecosystem, of course, but if the goal of the reporting is to force change that can have a meaningful and lasting positive impact on the silent and the powerless, journalists have an unmeasurable but definite responsibility to provide “truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning,” in the words of Robert M. Hutchins, the former president of the University of Chicago, who, in 1947, authored a timeless report on a free and responsible press in the United States.

The nature of accountability as it pertains to military-focused reporting has evolved considerably since the Hutchins Commission report was published. During World War II, war correspondents like Ernie Pyle reported on the stories of America’s fighting men from the “worm’s eye view” of the front lines with the express purpose of uniting readers against the Axis powers and to do whatever it took to win the war. Two decades later, Vietnam-era journalists prioritized investigating the political nature of the war and detailing the gaps between the government’s public statements and the true status and nature of the conflict on the ground. Since the end of America’s involvement in Vietnam, journalists have been criticized for being too critical of the military or not critical enough, either for being traitors to their nation or for cheerleading America into war. They are blamed for not telling enough stories and for perpetuating harmful stereotypes in the stories they do tell.

Today, as evidenced by the survey results, readers of military reporting want the media to hold the powerful to account (what could be called “bad press” for the powerful) without it devolving into *bad press*; that is, low-quality reporting that is poorly executed and undeserving of trust. One way to accomplish this may be for newsrooms covering the military and veteran affairs to refocus their coverage on failing systems and the power structures (and bad actors) that prop them up, rather than



settling for stories about scapegoated individuals who may be punished while the powerful work to maintain the status quo.

The case of U.S. soldier Bowe Bergdahl, who was held captive by the Taliban-aligned Haqqani network from 2009 to 2014 after he went AWOL from his base in Afghanistan, shows one particularly problematic example of accountability reporting and broken narratives in military coverage. Many news reports from around the time of both Bergdahl's disappearance and eventual return focused on how he had abandoned his post before he had been captured. A more robust story could have focused on the specifics of Bergdahl's case where necessary to avoid stereotyping every soldier in Afghanistan before pivoting to a larger narrative that allows for a wider contextual understanding of root issues and their lasting effects. Few news reports concerning Bergdahl noted, for example, that around the time he enlisted, the U.S. Army was struggling to meet its recruiting quotas and had set its standards low enough that a young man with a history of mental illness was placed into a highly stressful combat zone in which he was unlikely to perform his duties well.

The distinction between narratives that punch up at the powerful and those that punch down have some inherent qualitative distinctions, but readers appear to know it when they see it. To avoid producing *bad press*, journalists must move beyond the worm's eye view of what's wrong and look for root causes of issues in the systems in which we operate and the people who pull the levers of power. These sorts of stories hold the (actually) powerful to account, and, if done well, paint the individual service member as neither a pawn nor the architect of their own issues. Good accountability journalism can serve as the blinking red light that leads to meaningful reform.

Respondents to The War Horse survey also expressed an overarching inclination toward pragmatism. They said, for example, that they want to read more articles that help explain issues related to military health care and securing evidence-based treatments through the Department of Veterans Affairs. They also want to read stories about troops solving problems in the field, and military veterans reported that stories about how to approach life after their service in the military ends would be especially helpful. Such action-oriented journalism can empower the reader and has the added benefit of helping reporters avoid the negativity trap less thoughtful media coverage springs on its readers. After all, it's incredibly difficult to build trust without granting a reader a glimpse into a potentially better and more hopeful future.



Notes on Methodology:

Thanks to several existing surveys and robust studies, we know a great deal more about the so-called military-civilian divide than ever before. One related area we knew much less about is how, if at all, military and veteran-related media coverage widens the gaps in knowledge and understanding that separate military service members, veterans, and their families from those who have not served.

To help add to our understanding, The War Horse partnered with the George W. Bush Institute, the Institute for Veterans and Military Families, and Penn State University to design and launch a survey of its readers in September 2021. A total of 309 people completed the survey. Two-thirds of respondents identified as veterans or retired service members. One-fifth were spouses of a veteran or service member, and 11% were military dependents or the parent or sibling of someone who served. Twenty percent of respondents said they had no affiliation with the military. Civil servants comprised less than 3% of respondents, and 6% reported being on active duty.

Notable survey participants include six former government appointees, multiple senior military officials, and 18 current public affairs officers from across the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs. The 52 journalists who completed the survey represent legacy, nonprofit, and all military-focused news organizations, ranging from Military.com to ProPublica, PBS, and The New York Times.

In 2022, two policy researchers from the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy independently analyzed the survey results. Despite the inherent selection bias of the survey, the researchers looked for key findings supported by the results before collaborating with the lead author of the report to organize the findings, clarify the conclusions, and formulate appropriate calls to action. The final version of this report was completed in December 2022.