



When we Post About #Veterans: The Role of News Media in Guiding Social Media Dialogue about Military Veterans

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ABSTRACT

News media represent an important source of information for the civilian public when it comes to military veterans and the Armed Forces. This can be problematic given that journalists often present shallow representations of veterans. The present study seeks to understand how news stories shape public conversations about military veterans by examining when—and what—people communicate when talking about military veterans on social media in the United States. Borrowing a tool from the advertising field, the study uses “listening software” to identify: (a) peaks in Twitter conversations about veterans over the course of a year, (b) the subject matter discussed during those peaks, and (c) the frequency with which the conversation is driven by news stories. Results suggest the American news media and politicians often set the agenda for public dialogue concerning veterans on Twitter, perpetuating predominantly negative sentiment during every period except the major holidays—Veterans Day and Memorial Day. The discussion section offers veterans advice on how to take advantage of the trends to focus online conversations on proactive issues related to veterans.

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A divide exists between the American public and Armed Forces, such that civilians often do not understand the military or the experiences of its current and former service members (Taylor et al., 2011). The divide is attributable in part to the end of compulsory military service, commonly known as the draft, which has translated into fewer people personally serving or having close friends or family who do (Taylor et al., 2011). Military officials, veterans organizations, and others believe the news media partly fill the information void, perpetuating shallow and at times stereotypical representations of what it means to serve (e.g., Parrott et al., 2021).

Recent studies suggest that news exposure can nurture mental associations and attitudes—both positive and negative—toward veterans (Parrott et al., 2020). Otherwise, empirical research connecting news and public thoughts, attitudes, and behavior remains limited. The present study contributes to the literature by investigating whether news stories establish an agenda for conversations about veterans. Informed by agenda setting theory (McCombs et al., 2014), the study examines the relationship between news coverage of veterans and how users of a popular social media platform discuss veterans. It tests the potential of listening software to understand how social media users converse about veterans. The discussion section describes how the results can help veteran advocacy organizations better engage with social media users about issues and opportunities related to veterans and society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE MILITARY-CIVILIAN GAP

The United States ended compulsory military service in 1973, making the Armed Forces primarily dependent upon volunteers to serve (Selective Service System, 2021). The number of American adults who serve in the military declined during the ensuing decades (Schaeffer, 2021), translating into fewer people personally experiencing the Armed Forces or having a family member or close friend who served (Taylor et al., 2011). The lack of personal contact creates an information void, increasing the potential influence of alternative sources such as the mass media, which include news, dramatic film, video games, and other fare (Parrott et al., 2020). For example, Hollywood movies perpetuate stereotypes in which veterans are “ticking time bombs” or “superheroes” (e.g., Merry, 2015). Players adopt the role of soldiers who kill without consequence in video games. When news organizations write stories about veterans, the narratives often focus on negative mental and physical consequences of service (e.g., Wilbur, 2016) or heroism (e.g., Rhidenour et al., 2019). Veterans organizations and military officials expressed concern over these media narratives,

questioning the effect that exposure might have on public understanding of the military, veterans who are reintegrating into civilian society, and people’s desire to volunteer for the Armed Forces (e.g., Philipps, 2015; Schmidt, 2020).

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF VETERANS

The general public expresses positive attitudes concerning the military and its veterans (Pew, 2011), describing the Armed Forces as one of the most trusted institutions in the United States (Andrews, 2019). Veterans are generally held in high regard, described using terms such as “honor” and “hero.” Nevertheless, public understanding of veterans has been described as shallow (Pew, 2011), lacking deep understanding concerning veterans’ experiences in the Armed Forces and outcomes associated with those experiences. Indeed, public beliefs about veterans often reflect stereotypes of heroism, victimization, and trauma (Parrott et al., 2019). Service members could certainly experience each outcome, saving people, suffering because of government bureaucracy, and/or experiencing mental, physical, and spiritual harm as a result of service. Still, problems arise when an entire population is painted with the same brush, as veterans described to researchers (Schmidt, 2020). Despite social norms claiming the contrary, not all veterans are heroes and a significant proportion of veterans describe their time in the service as a source of pride and preparation (Igielnik, 2019). Surveys suggest the American public understands they (a) know little about the problems faced by members of the military, (b) experienced little impact from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and (c) prefer keeping military service voluntary (Pew, 2011).

THE AGENDA SETTING ROLE OF NEWS MEDIA

A growing body of research is examining the representation of the military and veterans in the news media (Kleykamp & Hipes, 2015; Rhidenour et al., 2019; Wilbur, 2016). So far, studies confirm the concerns of military officials and veterans: news media often perpetuate stereotypes associating service members with heroism, trauma, and victimization (e.g., Rhidenour et al., 2019). Research suggests exposure to such narratives may nurture decreased desire to be socially close to veterans; however, narratives challenging the stereotypes lead readers to desire greater closeness to veterans (Parrott et al., 2021). Thus, outcomes of news exposure are dependent upon the messages conveyed, leaving the potential for news media to improve public understanding and attitudes toward veterans.

Some scholars contend the news media do not necessarily tell the public *what* to think, but *what to think about* (McCombs et al., 2014). This is the premise of agenda setting, a popular theory in the field of mass communication research (McCombs et al., 2014). Applied to veterans, the

theory would posit that the more the news media focus on veterans' issues, the more the public will think about veterans, converse about veterans, and consider veterans' issues important. This focus is defined as *salience*.

While the premise may appear commonsensical, the implications are important because agenda setting contends that the news media determine which issues the public will talk about and consider important. The US war in Afghanistan presents an example. After 20 years, the conflict was suddenly thrust into the public spotlight when US President Joe Biden announced on April 14, 2021, the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan with an August 31, 2021, deadline. A sudden influx of news coverage occurred, politicians seized on the subject, and despite years of little news (and, in turn, public) attention, Afghanistan became prominent on the public agenda. To illustrate, social media users in the United States referenced "Afghanistan" 29,040 times on the Monday before Biden's announcement; 285,342 times on the Wednesday of the news conference; and 75,274 times on Friday 2 days after the conference.¹ By the end of the month, social media mentions of Afghanistan dropped below 40,000 mentions per day.

In addition to setting the agenda, research suggests that the news media may also shift public understanding of issues by highlighting certain bits of information while ignoring others (Entman, 1993). This process is called framing. To illustrate, news stories might focus on winning and losing when describing the withdrawal from Afghanistan, or human suffering associated with the withdrawal, or the conclusion of a so-called never-ending war. By stressing specific themes, or frames, the news media can shape how people think about issues.

Salience represents a key concept of agenda setting. As noted earlier, salience can be understood as how "top of mind" an issue is for a person. Put simply, an issue someone considers important—and thinks about often—would be salient. For people with family and friends who served in the military, the term "veteran" should be salient and less prone to influence by third-party sources such as news media because they already think about military service on a regular basis (McCombs et al., 2014). For others, increased journalistic attention to veterans should boost the salience of veterans on the public agenda, spurring increased conversation about veterans (McCombs et al., 2014). The increased attention could come via news media or major holidays such as Memorial Day (last Monday in May) and Veterans Day (November 11). The present study investigates this premise on Twitter, seeking to understand whether peaks in online conversations about veterans accompany news stories about veterans. If so, the study questions, what is the subject matter of those news stories? In other words, what are common themes, or frames?

Present Study

The study uses a methodological approach that borrows from the field of advertising. Marketers are interested in how the public engage with products, and increasingly they are focused on social media, given its ubiquity in modern society (Pew Research Center, 2021). Companies have developed "listening" software to keep tabs on social media conversations about products, companies, and other subjects (e.g., Sprinklr, 2021). Such software permits companies to identify trends in social media conversations, common words and sentiments associated with products, and other data drawn from publicly available social media accounts. Rather than a product, the present study focuses on military veterans, using listening software to identify trends in social media conversations about veterans, common words and sentiments associated with veterans, and the impetus behind peak moments of online conversation about veterans. Given the agenda setting role of the news media, the study tested the following:

Hypothesis: Peaks in Twitter conversations about veterans will be driven by news stories focused on veterans, except on major holidays (Memorial Day, Veterans Day).

In addition, the study asks:

Research Question 1: Do the dominant news stories embody common themes, or frames?

Researchers have identified common words associated with veterans, such as hero and honor, but less attention has been afforded to the emotions we associate with military veterans (Parrott et al., 2020). In the present case, the listening software affords an opportunity to understand the general sentiment expressed by social media users in association with veterans. As an exploratory question, the study examines the following:

Research Question 2: How does the valence (positive, negative) of social media posts concerning veterans change over the course of one year?

METHOD

The study used data mining and textual analysis to examine the hypothesis and research questions. Specifically, the study employed Sprinklr, a tool used by marketers to monitor audience engagement, to identify Twitter posts from the United States in which the word "veterans" was used between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020 (Sprinklr, 2021). Results were then parsed out into 2-week

increments to provide greater insight into the ebb and flow of Twitter conversations about veterans. Specifically, the study examined Twitter posts from 26 two-week time periods over the course of the year. Sprinklr affords users the ability to illustrate the frequency with which terms are used on specific dates via line graphs, as reflected in [Figure 1](#) (below).

It also permits users to review the specific content of posts. Therefore, the study was able to identify: (a) peak moments in the Twitter conversation about veterans in the United States, (b) the words most commonly used in those conversations during each peak period, (c) general sentiment in terms of positive or negative valence, and (d) the specific subject(s) users were discussing.

First, the peak moment in the online conversation was identified for each 2-week period. Second, the study examined the content of the conversation by cross-referencing word clouds and actual tweets. An example appears in [Figure 2](#) (below). In this case, the lead author first examined tweets to identify common subject matter, and then confirmed the finding using the word cloud.

To illustrate, for the period of September 1 to 15, 2020, mentions of veterans peaked on September 4. Social media users were primarily discussing an allegation that President Donald Trump called veterans “losers” and “suckers” based on the stream of tweets contained in the dataset. This conclusion was confirmed using the word cloud that appears in [Figure 2](#) (below), which suggests words commonly associated with veterans during this period were president, Trump, Atlantic, story, wounded, and disparaged.

RESULTS

Confirming the hypothesis, peaks in conversations about veterans were primarily driven by news stories with the exception of major national holidays. [Table 1](#) (below) illustrates peak moments in the social media conversation about veterans, accompanied by the primary focus of the communication stream.

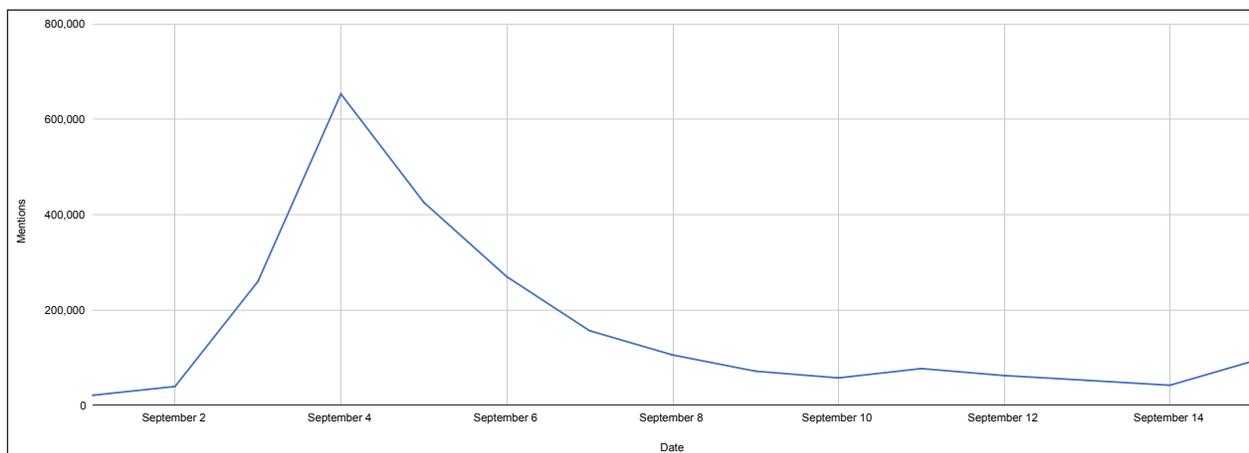


Figure 1 Line chart illustrating peak in Twitter mentions of “veterans” for September 1 to 15, 2020.

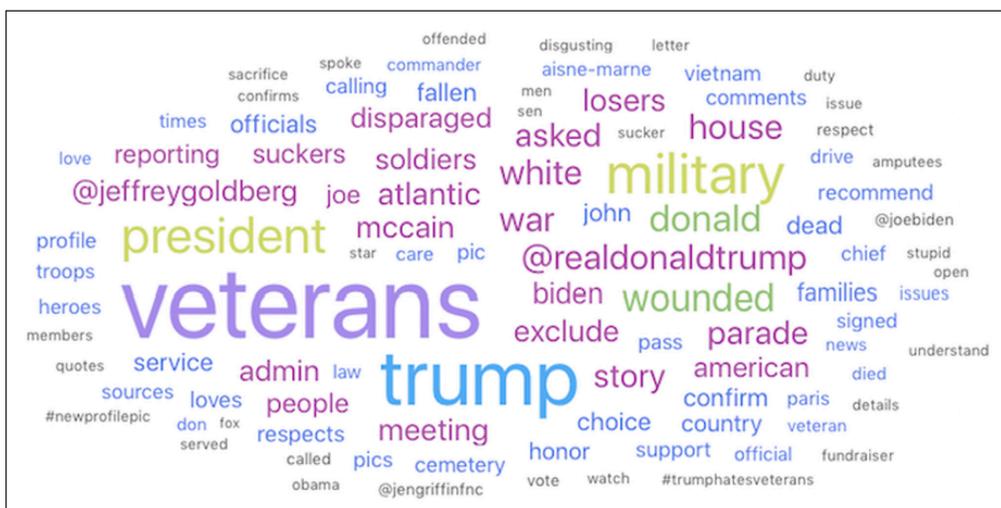


Figure 2 Word cloud illustrating terms commonly associated with “veterans” in Sept. 4 tweets.

TIME PERIOD	VALENCE OF TWEETS	PEAK DAY	PEAK TOPIC
January 1 to 15, 2020	72% negative 28% positive	January 1 26,261 mentions	Political news about Veterans Choice ¹
January 16 to 31, 2020	62% negative 38% positive	January 31 18,691 mentions	Veterans Choice ¹ ; Retweeting veterans crisis hotline number ³
February 1 to 14, 2020	55% negative 45% positive	February 12 87,293 mentions	Responding to Republican politician's tweet associating "liberal socialist" politicians with losing "freedoms...veterans fought and died for" ²
February 15 to 29, 2020	51% negative 49% positive	February 19 73,696 mentions	Veterans condemn Trump for attacking Army officer who testified against him ¹
March 1 to 15, 2020	52% negative 48% positive	March 4 69,783 mentions	Veterans Choice ¹ ; Dead veteran with no family for funeral ¹
March 16 to 31, 2020	55% negative 45% positive	March 29 62,541 mentions	National Vietnam War Veterans Day ³
April 1 to 15, 2020	59% negative 41% positive	April 15 16,931 mentions	Postal Service funding threatened, employer of veterans ³
April 16 to 30, 2020	56% negative 44% positive	April 21 27,647 mentions	COVID ravages VA hospitals ¹ ; experimental drugs tested on veterans ¹
May 1 to 15, 2020	52% negative 48% positive	May 8 21,551 mentions	Trump meets WWII veterans, does not wear COVID mask ¹
May 16 to 31, 2020	49% negative 51% positive	May 25 81,156 mentions	Memorial Day ³
June 1 to 15, 2020	70% negative 30% positive	June 4 20,641 mentions	Veterans challenge Trump's use of military to squash D.C. protests ¹
June 16 to 30, 2020	74% negative 26% positive	June 17 21,352 mentions	Presidential task force releases plan for veteran suicide prevention ¹
July 1 to 15, 2020	70% negative 30% positive	July 7 25,256 mentions	Pennsylvania nursing home gives veterans dangerous "COVID cocktail" of medication ¹
July 16 to 31, 2020	78% negative 22% positive	July 25 78,199 mentions	Veterans create protective wall around protestors in Portland, Oregon ³
August 1 to 15, 2020	83% negative 17% positive	August 14 85,000 mentions	Movement to support Postal Service because it provides veterans access to medication ³
August 16 to 31, 2020	83% negative 17% positive	August 16 45,087 mentions	Postal Service funding; stories of veterans not receiving medication ³
September 1 to 15, 2020	86% negative 14% positive	September 4 289,039 mentions	News story: Trump called veterans "losers" and "suckers" ¹
September 16 to 30, 2020	66% negative 34% positive	September 23 29,620 mentions	Trump honors veterans of the Bay of Pigs invasion ²
October 1 to 15, 2020	65% negative 35% positive	October 12 22,541 mentions	Political tweets attacking Joe Biden's record with VA Healthcare ³
October 16 to 31, 2020	57% negative 43% positive	October 19 19,470 mentions	News reports scrutinize Alabama politician Tommy Tuberville's veteran charity ¹
November 1 to 15, 2020	21% negative 79% positive	November 11 626,023 mentions	Veterans Day ³
November 16 to 30, 2020	47% negative 53% positive	November 18 13,222 mentions	Michigan debate over Election Day outcome "dishonors veterans" ¹ ; news photo of WWII veteran Remembrance Day goes viral ¹
December 1 to 15, 2020	53% negative 47% positive	December 10 12,152 mentions	Incoming president Biden names Denis McDonough secretary of veterans affairs ¹
December 16 to 31, 2020	57% negative 43% positive	December 23 15,059 mentions	An elected official (and veteran) calls for the Georgia governor to convene a special session concerning the election ²

Table 1 Bimonthly trends in Twitter conversations mentioning the term "veterans" in 2020.

Note: Bold indicates Top 3 days with most mentions of veterans. Within the topic column, superscript 1 indicates news story; 2 indicates politician driving topic; 3 indicates social media advocacy.

When comparing time periods, controversial political news events and a major holiday generated the most mentions. Veterans Day on November 11 witnessed 626,023 mentions of veterans on Twitter in the United States, by far the largest peak. The second largest peak occurred on September 4 (with 289,039 mentions), when social media users expressed outrage following the article in *The Atlantic* that claimed Trump called veterans “losers” and “suckers” (Goldberg, 2020). Another political controversy on February 12 helped generate 87,293 mentions of veterans on Twitter. Users responded to controversial remarks by Republican politician Nikki Haley who associated “liberal socialist” politicians with losing “freedoms ... veterans fought and died for” (Fink, 2020, para. 2).

Again, news stories accompanied peaks in dialogue about veterans on Twitter. When one examines the themes, or frames, employed by those news stories, two are prominent. First, news stories often perpetuated the stereotype of veterans as victims. Veterans allegedly suffered because of bureaucracy, as demonstrated when stories emerged of veterans not getting medication because of issues with the US Postal Service (e.g., Clark, 2020). Veterans allegedly suffered because of politicians, such as when Trump wore no mask while meeting World War II veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic (Keller, 2020). Veterans allegedly suffered because of abuse, such as being subjected to dangerous experimental drugs while elderly, infirm, or otherwise vulnerable (Cenziper & Mulcahy, 2020).

Less common, but present, was a news frame in which veterans demonstrated agency, standing up against alleged abuses of power. Veterans formed a protective wall around Black Lives Matter protestors in Portland, Oregon (e.g., Baker, 2020). They challenged Trump’s use of the military to squash political protests in Washington, D.C. (e.g., Sridhar, 2020). They defended an Army officer who suffered verbal abuse and threats after testifying against Trump during his impeachment proceedings (e.g., Schwartz, 2020).

In response to the third research question, Twitter posts adopted predominantly negative sentiments during every period except three—Memorial Day, Veterans Day, and November 18, when Twitter users shared a photograph of a man walking alone during a Remembrance Day parade. The image purported to show a veteran of World War II marching alone because he was the final survivor of his “battle group” (BBC Trending, 2016).² Beyond these periods of positive recognition and appreciation, it appears Twitter users were largely upset (e.g., angry or sad) about the way veterans are treated by politicians and government.

DISCUSSION

Informed by agenda setting theory, the present study sought to understand the relationship between news coverage and public conversations about military veterans in the United States on the popular social media platform Twitter. By examining Twitter mentions of veterans over one year, the study showed that peaks in conversations concerning veterans accompanied: (a) news stories and/or (b) political controversies highlighted by news stories. In addition to telling the public *when* to think about veterans, the news media also appear to communicate *what* the public should think about military veterans: As passive victims or agentic protectors of American ideals (e.g., freedom of speech, the right to protest). The study highlights the importance of the news media in drawing public attention to veterans, while also illustrating potential problems in the subject matter to which that focus is drawn.

Indeed, the study reinforces a growing line of research in which the news media provide the general public a narrow and often stereotypical representation of what it means to serve in the military. Echoing previous research, the study found that peak news stories often focused on instances in which veterans were mistreated by government and politicians. In addition, the study found that Twitter references to veterans demonstrated predominantly negative sentiment over time with the exception of major holidays (Veterans Day, Memorial Day). News, movies, television shows and other media reflect the culture of the United States. Combined with previous literature, the present study suggests American culture perpetuates an image of veterans as heroes who should receive sympathy from the civilian public because of the negative experiences they encounter from their service and from authority figures. Such a narrative conflicts with public opinion surveys in which a significant majority of veterans describe being proud of their service and say they would recommend the Armed Forces as a career (Pew, 2011). At the same time, however, the results mesh with research in which the majority of the public acknowledges it does not understand problems facing military service members (Pew, 2011) but thanks veterans for their service.

Indeed, the findings provide additional support for the idea of a “Support the Troops” cultural norm (Kleykamp et al., 2018) and suggest that the public, at least in one way, *does* support the troops. Although the behavior requires little effort, people used Twitter to rally around veterans to protest mistreatment, political manipulation, and other potential abuses of power. Twitter users

protested the federal government's financial support of the US Postal Service on three occasions during the year, describing the postal service as an employer of veterans and important link in the medical chain that provides veterans medication. They decried perceived misdeeds by politicians, ranging from the Commander-in-Chief's failure to wear a mask while meeting elderly veterans to alleged abuse of veterans in nursing homes and hospitals.

There are practical implications for organizations and individuals interested in advocating for veterans. First, veterans are a popular topic among the general public. Therefore, a receptive audience waits for advocacy messages concerning veterans. Second, major news events and holidays can generate hundreds of thousands of mentions on social media, potentially reaching millions of people. By focusing on major holidays and news events (even negative ones), advocacy organizations can insert themselves and their messages into a national dialogue about veterans. Indeed, as illustrated in the present dataset, grassroots movements prompted social media conversations about veterans during at least two periods of 2020, calling public attention to crisis hotlines for veterans and the importance of the US Postal Service for the delivery of prescription drugs. Finally, major social media events often employ hashtags to increase the number of people involved in the conversation (and to help the conversation trend), so it would behoove veterans' organizations to monitor key hashtags. Within the current study, three hashtags were used often: #VeteransDay and #MemorialDay on the holidays, and #veterans the remainder of the year.

In terms of limitations, the focus on Twitter excluded other popular social media such as Facebook and Instagram. The study focused on posts from the United States. Future research should examine whether commonalities emerge across nations in relation to the representation of military veterans. This is especially important given differences in service requirements (mandatory versus volunteer) across nations. In addition, the study examined use of one term, veterans, which means the results do not account for conversations in which social media users employed armed forces, military, and other terms.

In addition, the study does not shed light on the question "why," even though it does illustrate a relationship between news coverage and Twitter conversations about veterans. Using simple language (and risking oversimplification), the big question is, "Why do people only talk about veterans on holidays and when there are controversial news stories?" We cannot know for sure based on the data

found here. However, research from fields such as political communication might shed light on an answer.

Journalists are guided by several news values, including timeliness, proximity, impact, human interest, and conflict. An event happening now is newsworthy, while one that occurred two months ago is stale. News coming from the readers' local area is considered more important than news coming from the other side of the globe. The stories highlighted in this study often featured controversy. Controversial stories elicit emotion (e.g., anger, sadness) and increased attention from readers because they inherently focus on conflict between parties—bickering politicians, conflicting philosophies, differing opinions. Readers can be divided into sides, "us" and "them," with "us" being members of the same political party, people who hold comparable world views, or people who value veterans. Combined, these facts suggest that journalism news values (conflict) could lead to divisive stories about the mistreatment of veterans ("THEY are doing this to veterans"), which elicit strong emotion (anger, sadness), which in turn leads people to speak out in 280 characters or less.

What, then, do military veterans and advocates do to change the narrative? Advocates can educate journalists by sharing ideas for news stories, volunteering as news sources, and adopting other proactive approaches. Readers also value emotionally uplifting stories, ones that illustrate the triumphs and challenges of being human (i.e., human interest). Interrupting journalists' professional routines can shift a narrative.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature concerning news media and military veterans by demonstrating how peaks in Twitter conversations about veterans accompany news stories and political controversies. In addition to increasing the salience of veterans in the national conversation, the news media (over time) appear to communicate how readers should think about veterans: As suffering or standing up for the nation's ideals.

NOTES

- 1 Data was analyzed using Sprinklr, the tool described in this study's methods section, and the search term "Afghanistan" for the month of April.
- 2 A photographer in St. Petersburg told the BBC he took the photograph in 2007 and knew nothing about the veteran, demonstrating how social media users turned a photograph of a veteran into propaganda.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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