Vets in media

New study finds media perpetuate stereotypes of veterans

Douglas Wilbur, researcher and author of the study, is a DAV life member and doctoral student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

During its fifth season, released in June, Netflix’s hit show “Orange is the New Black” portrayed a group of veterans, hired as prison guards, as murderous, unstable war criminals. Understandably, DAV and various other veterans groups, publications and individual veterans took exception to the portrayal of mental instability and violence.

Through traditional and social media, the veteran community set off a firestorm, with many demanding an apology from the streaming service and swearing to never watch the show again. The series’ portrayal is just one of many in the media, both entertainment and news, that have unfairly cast veterans in such a negative light.
“The danger of this phenomenon is that these portrayals are coming at a time when many service members are returning home and looking for jobs,” said National Adjutant Marc Burgess. “If the public is fed this negative perception of veterans—even in a fictional way—it may affect how well they can transition back into civilian life.”

For example, the recently released Military.com Veterans Talent Index showed that while 73 percent of employers have made a stated commitment to hire veterans, 30 percent voiced concerns about hiring veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

However, a new study conducted by a DAV life member finds that while media often perpetuates negative stereotypes of veterans, rarely do they portray veterans as mentally unstable.

“The media are more sympathetic toward veteran issues than many believe; they just need guidance in the best ways to present these issues,” said Douglas Wilbur, the study’s researcher and author of the article “Defining the Iraq-Afghanistan Veteran in American Newspapers.” “By understanding how these issues actually are being portrayed, advocacy groups can better advise media and promote positive veterans’ stories.”

Wilbur, a doctoral student at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, is a combat veteran of three tours in Iraq and one in Kosovo. The former Army major conducted his study by examining articles written about post-9/11 veteran issues in seven major U.S. newspapers, wire services and local newspapers near military bases between 2011 and 2013.

He found that these articles focused on three primary “frames,” or ways in which the stories are told: bureaucratic enemy, which portrays veterans as returning home from war to fight another one against bureaucracies like the VA within the
federal government; family hardship, which discusses the lack of support for families from government and also portrays veterans’ families as casualties of the wars; and financial hardship, which portrays veterans as undercompensated and struggling to find employment when they separate from the military.

But for every frame there is also a counterframe, which Wilbur describes as a more positive portrayal of veteran issues. These include healing, which acknowledges veterans have problems but are healing and overcoming them; no problem, which portrays veterans transitioning back into society without any major problems; and moral obligation to help, which encourages the American public to do what they can to help veterans live productive lives when they return home from war.

However, Wilbur said journalists are predisposed to write about sensational topics, which is why many stories focus on perceived negativity surrounding veterans. He suggested the best way to combat that is building a coalition of veterans groups focused on identical positive counterframes and then partnering with other organizations that have a stake in veterans issues, such as USAA, Boeing and Northrop Grumman. They can use their communication power and influence to deliver the messages to the public.

“Douglas did an incredible job with this research, and these kinds of studies are invaluable for the communications field at large,” said National Communications Director Dan Clare. “His study focused solely on newspapers, so it would be interesting to see if the same findings are consistent across television, radio, movies and social media. Either way, his hard work and dedication is an incredible contribution to everyone involved.”
Learn more online

You can read Wilbur’s study, originally published in the journal *Sociology Study*, at davidpublisher.org/index.php/Home/Article/index?id=27688.html.