VETERANS COMING HOME

bridging the military-civilian divide
Today, less than 1% of Americans who are eligible actually serve in the military — and the ragtag force of civilian volunteers that fought for our independence has evolved into an elite squadron of professional soldiers. As a result, the other 99% of Americans don’t know many veterans — and the divide between their experiences and civilian life has grown deeper, and more difficult to navigate.

Many organizations and mediamakers advocate for better services, from job training to adequate medical care, to help veterans reintegrate. But the most difficult conversations to have — about what it means to be a citizen, about sacrifice, about moral injury and the complexities of serving a country that isn’t always grateful for your service — continue to feel awkward, taboo, and off-limits. As a result, half of returning veterans polled report that adjusting to civilian life is “somewhat or very difficult” (Kaiser/WaPo).
We brought this conversation into millions of homes across the US by thinking outside of the usual “public media” box — working with partner service organizations to find compelling stories and reach millennial veterans, and collaborating with publishers like Vox and Medium to reach new civilian audiences. VCH’s unique web content was amplified by videos and events produced by 11 public media stations across the country — activating the communities grappling with this divide in real time. And at every stage, we tested and optimized our approach and content, to ensure the campaign had maximum impact — and to generate new lessons for the field of impact filmmaking.

4,838,538 Online Viewers
60+ Digital Videos
Nationwide Broadcast
Innovative Partnerships
IMPACT STORY

For VCH, Kindling Group tested an innovative model for digital-first, public media campaigns — and as such, we hoped to not only bring veterans and civilians into dialogue, but also to experiment with cutting-edge ways to use video and social media for driving impact.

In March 2016, we launched the 8-month VCH digital video campaign with an explainer video outlining why and how the military-civilian divide has grown in recent decades, from falling enlistment to the increased mechanization of war. To reach the widest possible audience, we partnered with Vox on the video’s production and release — reaching over 2 million viewers out the gate.

These 7-10 minute videos explored a range of characters and challenges facing veterans as they return home, from surviving military sexual assault to grappling with moral injury to finding a new “tribe” outside their military family.

To find these unique stories and broaden our reach, we worked with a diverse and connected network:

- **Home Team:** A group of filmmakers, social media strategists, and impact producers based out of Kindling’s offices
- **Road Team:** 2 veterans and 2 civilians who field produced stories of the military-civilian divide around the country
- **National Public Media Partners:** CPB and PBS Stories of Service helped amplify our social media conversation and content
- **National Organizational Partners:** Veteran service organizations and service-oriented nonprofits co-produced VCH content highlighting unique stories of veteran reintegration
- **Local Stations:** Teams at 11 public television stations around the country hosted screening events and community conversations and produced videos featuring local veterans

For two months, we continued to release short-form videos introducing our characters and major themes, and followed the Road Team on social media as they traveled the country. On Memorial Day, 2016, we launched our flagship, longer-form video series that explored, narratively and in-depth, how veterans, civilians, and communities define service, citizenship, and how veterans can better reintegrate when they return home.
THE NUMBERS

WHO SAW IT?

43,223
YOUTUBE VIEWERS

3.7M
FACEBOOK VIEWERS

20+
COMMUNITY EVENTS

WHO’S TALKING ABOUT IT?

11
STATION PARTNERS

10+
OP-EDS

47,000
FACEBOOK FANS

WHO TOOK ACTION?

50,000+
EVENT ATTENDEES

$80,000
RAISED FOR VETERAN OUTREACH

25+
COMMUNITY PARTNERS
THE ROAD TEAM

To actively bridge the divide in our production process, we cast **two veteran** and **two civilian** media-makers — bringing skills including cinematography, editing, photography, and producing to each shoot on the road.

THE VETERANS

**Garrett Combs:** Garrett volunteered to serve in the U.S. Army in 2004 and was deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan. His personal experience transitioning back to civilian life held an equally weighty challenge, though, as his unit lost at least ten members to post-deployment suicide. Garrett’s story was was chronicled in the CNN feature documentary, *The War Comes Home*, Soledad O’Brien Reports. Today, Garrett is a photographer and filmmaker.

**Ramon Garcia:** Ramon spent 8 years in the army as a counter intelligence agent in Iraq and Afghanistan and at the National Ground Intelligence Center in VA. He has since participated in a Writers Guild mentorship program and assists veteran writers with the production of webisodes based on their military experiences.

THE CIVILIANS

**Kathleen Flynn:** Kathleen is a multimedia photojournalist with 18 years in newspapers. She has covered stories from the tsunami in Thailand, immigration in Mexico, post-conflict Liberia, the pharmaceutical industry in India, the war in Afghanistan, and Haiti.

**Michael Premo:** Michael is an accomplished filmmaker, multi-platform storyteller, photographer, activist and organizer. He was co-creator of the award winning transmedia projects Sandy Storyline, Housing is a Human Right and Water Warriors.
I first became involved in veterans issues after being asked by to mentor a group of veteran filmmakers who were shooting a short film. The experience was transformational for me; I realized that until that project, I had never had a personal relationship with anyone who had served in the military post-9/11. I was effectively a living example of the military/civilian divide.

Working with veterans made me see that my strong opinions on America’s military and the ways in which we engage militarily around the world had colored my own set of biases and preconceptions about the men and women who volunteer for military service. I became deeply involved in veterans issues — I joined board of the Veterans Artist Program, developed a veterans grant and education program with the Tribeca Film Institute, and began working with Starbucks and the Shultz Family Foundation on their 10,000 Veterans hiring initiative.

Still, I found that most projects about the military were either unabashedly pro or anti-military and rarely explore the relationship between the 99% of Americans who don’t serve in the military and the 1% who do. The design and execution of the VCH production plan grew directly out these experiences — and my belief that all projects are made stronger when they are staffed with people with diverse backgrounds, experiences and viewpoints. It naturally followed that a project exploring the military/civilian divide should be staffed with both military veterans and civilians.

Going on the road with this group of filmmakers, combat veterans, activists, and journalists was an incredible experience, as was having the the New York production office staffed with veterans on both the logistical and editorial sides. The compressed timeframe in which we were working forced us to navigate a variety of agendas and worldviews in order to find the common ground on which we could build an effective storytelling model. The experience reconfirmed my belief that effective storytelling starts with grappling directly with issues of representation, agency and authorship.
As Kindling Group’s Director of Engagement, it’s my job to build a team and a strategy that leads each of our unique impact campaigns — from feature films to Youtube channels to grassroots events — to success. For VCH, that meant building an expert team of impact and digital strategists who could take the stories coming in from the field and put them towards real, measurable change.

We interviewed more than a dozen stakeholders from veteran and civilian organizations on a fact-finding mission to learn more about where this divide was most palpable, and where we could find opportunities to close it. That research set the stage for a brain trust with partners and experts in Washington, D.C., where we laid out a potential story arc, in three acts, that would lead us to achieving our impact goals.

With our basic premise and theory of change in place, we had to create a monitoring and evaluation plan to measure our progress. This included collecting data from a variety of sources: partner event surveys, digital surveys, and digital metrics. We learned a great deal about how to measure success for a project focused on the sometimes-amorphous goals of “awareness-raising” and “building dialogue.” What’s a substantive conversation? How do you know you’re making a dent in a prevailing narrative?

We enlisted The Harmony Institute to help answer those questions, using digital listening technology to track volume and public sentiment around specific keywords for a given topic — in our case, veterans issues. They found that we succeeded in shifting our audience to our target demographic — millenial veterans and their peers — and that we built a very engaged core audience, on Facebook in particular.

Most importantly, our campaign successfully changed perspectives: on Facebook, 67% of those surveyed reported that watching a VCH video changed their perspective on the military-civilian divide, and 66% reported being more likely to get involved in community activities to bridge this divide.
Wisconsin Public Television took on this work with an appreciation for public broadcasting’s capacity to tell deeply compelling personal stories and convene communities around issues of importance. Working within the framework of a digital series, WPT has led the 11 Veterans Coming Home partner stations in training on new digital tools, hosting community events around the military-civilian divide, and driving change on veteran reintegration in their communities. In essence, WPT built a bridge from local stations to national, online distribution, from national veterans organizations to local communities, and from public television stations to the veterans and the communities they serve.

As the glue binding VCH stations and national production together, WPT hosted webinars, managed our advisory board, and wrangled station videos and events — and, we produced unique content and grassroots events ourselves, highlighting the stories and contributions of veterans in Wisconsin. We produced six original videos, and around Memorial Day 2016, in partnership with Wisconsin Public Radio, the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, and Memorial Union, hosted an event to preview Veterans Coming Home alongside Wisconsin Remembers, a traveling exhibit displaying photos of all 1,161 Wisconsinites listed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC.

Wisconsin Public Television has been extremely gratified to be the hub of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting’s Veterans Coming Home.
PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Building on the robust partnerships with veteran service organizations established in the first year of VCH, Kindling Group deepened and expanded these relationships in the project's second phase. Leaning on our lead partners Got Your Six and the Veteran Artist Program for research and connections to additional VSOs, we experimented with new styles of collaboration — not only working together on events and cross-promoting content on social media, but also sourcing story ideas and actually co-producing videos, editorials, and blog posts on Medium. To explore the civilian side of the divide, we expanded our partnerships to include service organizations that don’t focus on veterans per se, but benefit from the skills and expertise of the veterans in their communities.

One of the most fruitful collaborations of VCH 2.0 was with We Are the Mighty, a media organization that produces content for servicemembers, veterans, and their families. WATM had an archive of footage featuring veterans doing standup — and requested our assistance in repurposing these hilarious sets for social media. We edited the highlights together into five short videos — one of which went viral on Facebook — and featured some of the footage in a longer flagship video, alongside original, Road Team produced shoots with the comedians. This collaboration provided incredible, compelling stories that promoted the work of WATM, challenged the divide, and saved VCH on production time and costs. Wins all around!

PARTNER STORIES
Learn more and get involved

VETERANS COMING HOME

www.kindlinggroup.org/veterans-coming-home