

Whalen Symposium: Abstract for Award Consideration

Sophia Tulp, Elena Piech, Parita Desai and McKinleigh Lair

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Report from the Border: Media and Political Representation vs. Reality

We arrive at a Burger King in Nogales, Arizona, a city straddling the U.S./Mexico border. From the checkout counter, we see the massive wall snaking its way through the foothills, dividing the two countries. In the 1990s, the initial barrier was built, a fence separating “us” from “them” (Carcamo, 2018). As we approach the wall, we learn that today it is almost unrecognizable from its original state. Three layers of barbed wire, metal gates, and high-tech security apparatuses now tower above the twin cities (Miller, 2017).

The number of illegal border crossings over this wall have decreased significantly. Over one million fewer migrants cross the border each month now, as compared to the height of migration in the 1980s (Qiu, 2018). But the ever-growing wall tells a different story, one that is perpetuated by the government and told and re-told by media. One that citizens who live along the border say does not reflect reality.

We traveled to the border as senior Park Scholars. Each year seniors attend a service-learning trip, and in January 2019, our trip took us to the Arizona borderlands. We conferred with both individuals and organizations who have been touched by the “crisis” along America’s southern border. Cameras and audio recorders in hand, we walked along the wall with author Todd Miller, who wrote *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security*. We visited a safe home for LGBTQ+ undocumented migrants and met a man who told us about the horrors he faced during his journey. We took notes as we sat in court observing

undocumented people being processed through Operation Streamline — 74 people in under three hours. Later we sat in the same courthouse as volunteers from No More Deaths, a humanitarian aid group, were allotted days for their criminal proceedings after delivering water to migrants in the desert (Phillips, 2019).

We came with context. Miller's book covered the politicization and militarization of the border. The entire Park Scholar program also read Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*, detailing the barriers undocumented unaccompanied minors face arriving in the U.S. However, these narratives were outliers, stories rarely presented by the mainstream media.

Our trip came to a head as the government experienced a prolonged shutdown over withheld funds to complete President Donald Trump's campaign-declared border wall, and just weeks before he would go on to declare a state of emergency. At the same time, conversations intensified about the validity of his statements and how the media has covered and contributed to the conversation on immigration for decades. We experienced this first-hand in Nogales, Arizona. Activists, lawyers and migrants voiced the frustrations that come from journalists helicoptering in without fully understanding the community and its historical landscape.

As Park students and future media makers, we saw ourselves in this problem. We are taught to fit into the model most journalists use in reporting in crisis situations. Much of the media we consume and many of the journalists we look to as examples fall into this paradigm of helicopter reporting, flying in to cover a "crisis" one-sidedly and with little historical context. After witnessing in person how this type of reporting leaves out important information and detail, we have realized that the current approach used by the majority of media organizations in

reporting on the immigration “crisis” paints an incomplete picture that fits a specific narrative — one that paints migrants as a dangerous strain on American resources and dubs the “crisis” as an issue unrelated from U.S. interventions in Central and South America.

Our conversations with stakeholders at the heart of the situation in Arizona helped us analyze the pitfalls and real-life impact of traditional media coverage and consider how we can better move forward in ethical and contextual coverage that gives the full picture. We hope that by reflecting on our experience and sharing this with other media-makers, we can provide a model for how other journalists can gain rich context before beginning work in communities at the center of national intrigue and importance and can consider the impact of their practices on the communities who experience the aftermath in real time. Through our experience we aim to be more ethical and critically engaged media makers as we go on to become a part of the forces that will shape future coverage of this issue.

Work Cited

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