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Digital portrayals of migration to America: A study of Peter Santenello's YouTube channel
Cyfrowe obrazy migracji do Ameryki: studium kanału YouTube Petera Santenello

Abstract

This article explores how Peter Santenello's *Border Series*, viewed more than ninety million times on YouTube, depicts U.S. migration in the early 2020s. After years abroad as a travel vlogger, Santenello returned to the United States determined to show the country from the ground up, arguing that mainstream outlets overlook crucial realities. His *Border Series* is part of this turn. Through close readings of selected episodes, the paper identifies three recurring rhetorical patterns in his coverage of migration to the U.S. First, Santenello's hand-held camera gains entry to police trucks, farm fields, hotels, and desert contacts to the mainstream representations which are considered to be politically biased. Second, each video functions as a "third space" where roles remain fluid: migrants appear as commodities or humanitarian cases, sheriffs shift from protectors to reluctant aid workers, and viewers assign these labels through real-time debate. Third, Santenello's civic-traveler style combines storytelling with witnessing; by rejecting the journalist label yet featuring multiple viewpoints, he widens the circle of voices that narrate the border and resists classical media framing. Taken together, these patterns show that digital, personality-driven reporting is remapping migration discourse, turning contested ground into a shared arena for seeing and arguing.

Artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób seria *Border Series* Petera Santenello, wyświetlona na platformie YouTube ponad dziewięćdziesiąt milionów razy, przedstawia migrację do USA na początku lat 20. XXI wieku. Po latach spędzonych za granicą jako vloger podróżniczy, Santenello powrócił do Stanów Zjednoczonych z zamiarem ukazania kraju „od podstaw". Twierdził, że media głównego nurtu pomijają kluczowe realia dotyczące migracji, a cykl *Border Series* miał być próbą pokazania tych zagadnień z innego punktu widzenia. Na podstawie analizy wybranych odcinków autor artykułu identyfikuje trzy powtarzające się ramy retoryczne w relacjach Santenello. Po pierwsze, kamera trzymana w ręku przez Santenello otwiera dostęp do policyjnych radiowozów, hoteli, pól uprawnych, a także do spotkań i interakcji rozgrywających się na pustynnych odcinkach granicy, co stanowi wyraźny kontrast wobec relacji mediów głównego nurtu, często postrzeganych jako politycznie stronnicze. Po drugie, każdy film tworzy swoistą „trzecią przestrzeń", w której role pozostają elastyczne: migranci ukazani są zarówno jako towar, jak i podmioty wymagające humanitarnej troski, szeryfowie zmieniają się z obrońców prawa w uprzedzonych pracowników pomocowych, a widzowie kształtują i negocjują te role w czasie rzeczywistym. Po trzecie, obywatelsko-podróżniczy styl Santenello łączy narrację z funkcją świadka; rezygnując z etykiety dziennikarza, a jednocześnie przedstawiając różne punkty widzenia, poszerza krąg głosów opowiadających o granicy i podważa klasyczne ramy medialne. Schematy te pokazują, że cyfrowa narracja oparta na osobowości jej autora redefiniuje dyskurs migracyjny, przekształcając sporne terytorium we wspólną przestrzeń obserwacji i debaty.

Key words

rhetoric of migration, digital border representations, YouTube series, personality-driven reporting, Peter Santanello
retoryka migracji, cyfrowe reprezentacje granicy, seria na YouTube, reportaż oparty na osobowości autora, Peter Santenello

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Digital portrayals of migration to America: A study of Peter Santenello's YouTube channel[1]

1. Introduction

Borderlands form a third space where locals and newcomers unceasingly negotiate presence. Since January 2021, YouTuber Peter Santenello has made that liminality visible through a thirteen-episode *Border Series* filmed along the U.S.–Mexico and U.S.–Canada frontiers and watched more than fifty million times. The article asks how Santenello moves gatekeeping from newsrooms to YouTube metrics and what that means for the rhetoric of migration. The paper uses three literatures: participatory culture, platformized gatekeeping, and Bhabha's third-space to argue that digital journalism neither abolishes nor simply imitates institutional authority; instead, it relocates border storytelling to a hybrid arena where the categories legal/illegal and insider/outsider are renegotiated in real time.

The paper first profiles Santenello's evolution from travel vlogger to YouTube--based 'border reporter'. It then close-reads selected border episodes and describes their shared six-step story arc and role assignments. A concluding discussion situates these findings within platform logics and current debates on digital migration narratives.

2. Santenello: From traveler to digital journalist

The content creator's digital presence challenges traditional categories of journalism and travel documentation. Central to understanding his narrative function is recognizing the multiplicity of his roles: he is at once a traveler, an American citizen, and a self-appointed mediator of American cultural realities. The GoPro he uses grants him access, lowers his profile, and creates instant

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intimacy. The man behind the camera invites viewers into "worlds the media fails to capture" in the YouTube channel description (Santenello, About a), not from the authoritative voice of mainstream journalism, but from the perspective of a participant observer.

He defines his videos as "stories from places and people the media overlooks" (Santenello, About b). Growing up in rural Vermont and visiting eighty-five countries taught him that the best way to learn is by meeting "ordinary people, eye-to-eye, on their turf" (Santenello, About b). He enters reservations, border motels, and city projects as "a guest, not an expert," giving viewers a street-level map of America that, he says, legacy news misses (Santenello, About b).

However, this self-presentation as an "ordinary citizen" comes with the privileges of being a white, U.S.-born man with secure national status, a privilege that grants him easier access to certain spaces and shape how he is received. In the context of migration, for example, this freedom of movement across contested spaces without fear of detention or deportation gives him an advantage that inevitably shapes the stories he tells and whose voices are heard. Similarly, when visiting Jewish or African American communities, his approach is marked by an intent to listen and understand rather than to judge, yet it remains framed through the empathetic, but inevitably white, perspective he brings to his encounters.

Still, reducing Santenello to a one-dimensional, conservative viewpoint would be inaccurate. His development as a YouTuber shows an awareness of the dynamics of otherness, and his work engages, though unevenly, with perspectives beyond his own social position. He is not simply an American abroad; he is an expat whose long-term observation of foreign life provides him with comparative lenses when he returns to his home country. Across the videos he has made, it is possible to trace Santenello's professional journey from a young traveler and English teacher in a South Asian country to a full-time travel vlogger before eventually returning to the United States. He lived in Ukraine for several years, continuing to produce videos, and during this stage he established himself primarily as a traveling YouTuber. Returning to Vermont in October 2020 after many years of travelling and living abroad, he tells the camera that he had planned to shoot "a nice little video" showcasing his home state's scenery, "how it's different than the rest of America" (Santenello 2020a, 0:45–0:58). His purpose is that of a traveler who visits other locations to introduce them to the viewer, with a difference of showing his hometown. However, Seeing Black Lives Matter signs everywhere, he changed course: "I decided to scrap that idea and get into the story of why all these signs are here" (2020a, 1:01–1:10). That on-camera decision can be seen as a shift from Santenello-the-traveler to Santenello-the-reporter. The remainder of the episode documents that shift. By the closing shot, the GoPro has changed

from tourist gadget to improvised reporting tool. The video foretells the domestic, issue-driven investigations that will continue in *The Border Series*.

In his earlier videos abroad, the YouTuber appears as a traveler seeking to challenge xenophobia. Upon returning to the U.S., however, he turns his attention to domestic social and political issues. His years of living and working abroad had already given him a heightened awareness of his own country, allowing him to view American communities from a comparative perspective. His white privilege, much like the GoPro he carries, can make him appear less threatening to those he films. As a white man, he is perceived as belonging to the cultural mainstream in the United States, which shapes the way he approaches his encounters, observing and reflecting on the experiences of others from that standpoint.

Santenello consciously repositions himself, not just as a traveler, but as a re--discoverer of his own country. He visits places largely ignored by national media: border towns in Arizona, impoverished urban projects, Native American reservations, Chicano communities in California, Amish settlements in Pennsylvania, and more. His explorations into the lives of U.S. Jews, Muslims, recovering drug addicts, and formerly incarcerated individuals are consistent with a deliberate focus on America's margins. He adopts the role of a mediator between marginalized groups and his audience, and between his own perception and the social realities he documents. However, he does so by maintaining the stance of an ordinary citizen rather than that of an investigative reporter.

This refusal to take on the authority of a journalist is itself a performative stance. He repeatedly reminds his audience that he is not a professional journalist "The fact that me, as the YouTuber has to be the one doing this work is a bit crazy and a bit telling of the media landscape we currently live in." (2024b 24:49--25:01) says Santenello positioning himself as a Youtuber doing unprofessional journalism. He continues by adding that this is possible with the online platforms to lay out a journalistic stance for the whole channel: "Ask questions, dig deeper, be respectful, and don't be afraid to speak up." (2024b 25:07–25:09). He positions himself as an individual with an investigative spirit.

Yet he also frames his videos through selective questions, editorial decisions, and final commentary that reveal narrative control. His authority is informal, emergent from the authenticity of the encounter and from his position as an outsider-insider: someone deeply rooted in American cultural identity yet distanced by his prior global experience. Thus, his presence in front of the U.S.-Mexico or U.S.-Canada border is not merely documentary, it is personal. He is not only seeing America but interpreting it, bringing his viewers along in a digital reenactment of the classic literary method: the journey that reveals the self through the other.

Santenello works as a "civic traveler." Instead of chasing exotic backdrops, he often points his GoPro at migration, race, poverty, and trust in U.S. institutions. By doing so, he aims to present a more textured picture of America. His focus is not limited to tragedies or major events; instead, he follows stories that personally interest him. The phrase "go where the story is" could be considered his guiding principle. Even when addressing more difficult topics such as the border, he approaches them from the standpoint of an ordinary citizen, seeking to understand and convey the human dimension of the issue. In border videos, by showing up and listening, he tries to "be with" people rather than simply report on them, positioning himself as a bridge between law-enforcement voices, frustrated locals, and migrants who seldom speak on camera. The result is a running negotiation of American identity: one minute he amplifies sheriffs and logistics, the next he describes the anxieties of asylum seekers or legal residents by speaking for them.

This shifting stance is the core of his channel. Santenello refuses labels, neither mainstream journalist nor outright activist, yet he occupies the space between them. That hybrid position lets him question power while avoiding strict partisanship, creating a digital forum where stories unfold in the intersection of observation and participation. His value lies in the new form of discursive space, situated between personal reflection and public inquiry, between the power to represent and the passivity to observe. At the same time, this hybrid space raises unresolved ethical questions: how does Santenello negotiate consent, protect vulnerable subjects, or address the potential for re-traumatization in depicting problematical aspects of the US? Without the editorial safeguards and legal frameworks applied in legacy media, representation becomes a matter of personal judgment, allowing flexibility but also removing formal protections for those being represented. It is within this digital space, neither mainstream nor marginal, that the figure of the civic traveler becomes not just a storyteller, but a part of new possibilities in the representation of migration.

Peter Santenello's position as a content creator differs from that of a traditional journalist or a classical traveler. While journalists are historically tied to institutional authority and a professional code of objectivity, Santenello operates within the decentralized ecosystem of YouTube, claiming independence from the constraints and perceived biases of mainstream media. His assertion for not being a professional journalist is a rhetorical strategy that distances him from institutionalized gatekeeping and positions him instead as a citizen-listener. However, this denial of journalistic authority does not equate to a lack of narrative control. As the work of Siciliano (2023, 4) on platformized gatekeeping reminds us, even independent creators operate within algorithmic and social economies of visibility and trust and often shape public discourse through their own curatorial

power. Alfred Hermida argues that journalism has transitioned from being the sole arbiter of "the truth" toward becoming a transparent, collaborative practice, where journalists openly reveal how news stories evolve and invite the public into the process of verification (2015, 47). Enabled by networked technologies, journalism now includes diverse actors who reinterpret and disseminate news, thus challenging traditional media gatekeeping and showing a hybrid, participatory approach (Hermida 2015, 40). Santenello can be seen as an example of this shift. By positioning himself as a transparent, participatory journalist, he openly acknowledges the uncertainties and contested nature of the stories he covers, actively integrating various perspectives to co-construct meaning together with his audience. His practice highlights how contemporary journalism embraces decentralization and collaborative truth-making.

The YouTuber frames his channel as an alternative to the 'reality' of partisan news, insisting that his job is to "get the on-the-ground reality into the online reality" (Santenello 2024c, 3:31–3:35). This is also possible due to technological developments. His gear choice, the pocket-sized GoPro, lets him "bring the audience closer" while appearing "harmless," whereas a full crew would "change their behavior" and stiffen the encounter (Santenello 2024c, 6:19–6:55). Because the camera is light and cheap; "I keep overhead very low … so I'm not forced to chase advertisers or trending topics" (Santenello 2024c, 8:33–8:56). He alone decides which scenes reach the feed. The tiny camera lets him be a gatekeeper while criticizing legacy media: it relaxes sources, avoids sponsors, and replaces professional reporting with minimal editing. Nonetheless, YouTube itself is not a neutral stage. Santenello's reach is mediated by algorithms, recommendation systems, and platform policies that prioritize certain narratives over others. While he claims freedom from advertising pressures, monetization, sponsorships, and audience growth still influence what is viable to produce and publish. The platform's relative lack of regulation compared to legacy media also raises questions about accuracy, accountability, and the amplification of certain viewpoints over time.

The channel's success is reflected in the high number of views and in the loyal audience he has gathered over time. His following appears to be composed largely of viewers disillusioned with legacy media, seeking what they perceive as unfiltered, "on the ground" perspectives, alongside those interested in U.S. cultural diversity and contested political issues like migration. This sustained attention not only affirms his influence but also sustains the channel financially; through YouTube monetization, sponsorships, and viewer donations, his work carries a clear commercial dimension. By acknowledging his audience directly in videos and inviting engagement through comments and social media, Santenello has built a community that both shapes and amplifies his content.

3. Migration in *The Border Series*: Themes, narratives, and roles

3.1. The border-as-marketplace: The southern American border

"Questioning Human Smuggler" (2021) video brings viewers into direct proximity with the mechanisms of illegal migration across the southern U.S. border. The conversation is mediated by Raul, who was introduced in an earlier video from the series. Raul works for a private security corporation and is well informed with the border issues and acts as a contact person and host to introduce Santenello and the viewers to the border issues. This video offers a rough look at the logistics, hierarchies, and moral ambiguities of smuggling by interviewing Tony, an independent contractor working under cartels to deliver illegal immigrants to different parts of the US. Tony is a fake name, and the video has his face and voice altered. Nevertheless, the video does not present Tony as a voiceless trafficker, but rather as a man involved in a "business model" that operates within a rational—if morally and legally contested—system. "There's a whole industry," Santenello tells the viewer at the outset, "and that's what we're going to learn about very soon" (Santenello 2021, 1:22). While Tony's narrative provides contextual detail, the migrants he moves remain off-screen, their stories filtered entirely through his account and Raul's paraphrasing. This reliance on secondary narration echoes certain legacy media tendencies, where migrant agency is mediated by law enforcement or logistical actors rather than represented in their own terms. The choice might stem from safety, language, or access constraints, but it nonetheless reproduces a dynamic where migrants appear as backgrounded subjects—present in policy and price, absent in voice. But this situation is again because of Santenello's approach as a video maker who tries to keep things small. His position as the white man who can communicate in English necessitate the presence of intermediary. And that is exactly a reasonable position that an average person might experience if they were to visit border.

Throughout the video, Raul translates and at times paraphrases Tony's statements, often adding interpretive layers that make the operations of the smuggling networks more legible to an English-speaking audience. For example, Raul describes the cartel's enforcement system by saying, "You're not going to do anything without my [cartel's] permission" (Santenello 2021, 18:59). This phrase comes from Raul's characterization of the cartel's rule over territorial passage and its enforcement through threats of violence or extortion. The same applies to Raul's explanation of the colored wristbands assigned to migrants, which serve as tracking and authorization devices. These objects, Raul explains, are tied to cartel-controlled records and function as forms of identification and compliance: "If you don't have this bracelet on… they could kill you, they could beat you, they could charge you a fine" (Santenello 2021, 17:39). Here, technical details such as

colored wristbands used by cartels to identify people serve as evidence in a way similar to institutional journalism. They show control and measure movement, but still present migrants as objects being monitored and categorized within a system of enforcement. This precise information gives a clear picture of operations, yet it also reinforces the idea of migrants as part of a managed inventory rather than as individuals making their own choices and taking personal risks.

The content creator's presence as an intermediary figure, the host, the questioner, and the audience proxy frames the video's epistemology. He carefully maintains a posture of moral ambiguity, reminding viewers in the final segment that he is "very much against illegal immigration" (Santenello 2021, 22:54), while also emphasizing the complexity of what he has just presented. This closing reflection aligns with a familiar journalistic framing technique: balancing moral disapproval with recognition of systemic complexity. It positions the reporter/host as a fair--minded observer but, like much institutional coverage, still withholds the primary perspective of the people most directly affected. As a result, the humanitarian dimension remains mediated rather than spoken from within. The emotional centerpiece of the interview is Tony's defense of his work: "If I don't do it, someone else is going to do it anyway" (Santenello 2021, 13:29) Tony says through Raul. He distances himself from more violent traffickers, insisting that he merely helps migrants who the YouTuber defines as people "want to come in for whatever reason: a better life, or whatever the reason might be" (Santenello 2021, 21:58).

This video positions the migrant not as a visible speaking subject, but as a transactional figure moved across borders by logistical forces; cartels, drivers, policies. The human smuggler, by contrast, is given a voice, context, and in Tony's case, even a degree of empathy. Santenello's coverage reveals a layered power structure in which migrants are tracked, priced, and exposed to varying risks depending on origin, gender, or age. The cartel emerges as a parallel state apparatus, complete with infrastructure, policy enforcement, and record keeping, while Raul's explanations frame the process in ways that alternate between exposition and normalization. Through this mediated access, the video educates the viewer on a difficult 'industry' that defines the border zone not merely as a geopolitical line, but as an active, violent, and monetized space of passage.

From a technical standpoint, this portrayal is built through a combination of testimonial translation, close framing on law enforcement narrators, and object-based evidence (bracelets, maps, patrol footage). These are hallmarks of investigative field reporting, yet here they are adapted to the creator economy's aesthetics: handheld GoPro intimacy, continuous movement through terrain, and episodic narrative arcs designed for YouTube's recommendation logic. While the form differs from legacy media's segmented broadcasts, the structural absence of migrant self-representation remains.

Later in 2023, in the most viewed video of the series, “At US/Mexico Border With Arizona Sheriff”, Santenello offers viewers exclusive access to the southern border near Yuma, Arizona, guided by Sheriff Leon Wilmot. Through this firsthand tour, the video presents a portrayal of migration as a system shaped by geopolitical policy, criminal economies, and humanitarian crisis. Migrants appear less as victims than as commodities traded within a larger mechanism. What emerges is a narrative that questions the limits of national sovereignty, the consequences of federal policy, and the ethics of border enforcement.

The video emphasizes the commodification of migrant lives. Sheriff Wilmot describes a system in which cartels monetize human movement with precision, quoting prices that range “anywhere from $6,000 per person up to $15,000,” depending on nationality and destination (Santenello 2023, 2:27). These smuggling networks operate with logistical sophistication. Migrants are flown to cities like Mexicali, then guided to the U.S. border by car or foot. Once near the border, they are instructed to discard passports and claim asylum. Wilmot remarks, “It's a commodity. It's not a human life” (Santenello 2023, 40:48). This framing points not only to the dehumanization of migrants by criminal actors but also criticizes how policy and infrastructure fail to protect migrants from being processed through such exploitative practices at the time.

Local law enforcement and community institutions are portrayed as overburdened, left to manage the aftermath of a failing federal system. Wilmot laments that his county spends more than $1.2 million annually on incarcerating criminal offenders, while federal reimbursement is “5 cents on the dollar” (Santenello 2023, 52:36–52:42). Local services absorb the costs, such as Yuma’s sole hospital writing off twenty-three million dollars (Santenello 2023, 51:16––51:29). Porta-johns in farm fields to stop migrants from littering and defecating to contaminate the farm fields (Santenello 2023, 11:54-12:13) and sending man to rescue abandoned families in the desert (2023, 33:09–33:48) become symbols of how local systems are forced into a humanitarian role they are neither resourced nor designed to fulfill. Migration, in this context, is not merely a border issue but a logistical, moral, and economic burden.

The sheriff’s discourse also includes a political critique. He points to the failed response to the crisis because of the policies of the Biden administration and DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas (Santenello 2023, 12:24–12:41), framing the situation as “a nation crisis” (Santenello, 2023, 53:01) driven by “personal and political ideologies” (Santenello, 2023, 26:55–27:06). His rhetoric emphasizes enforcement of the “rule of law” and the need for migrants to enter “through a port of entry” (Santenello 2023, 26:22–26:41). Yet this framing coexists with an acknowledgment of the humanitarian dimensions: migrants are not portrayed as

inherently criminal but as people acting out of desperation. Santenello himself refers to ethical ambiguity, asking, “Why wouldn’t you want to go where the opportunity is?” (Santenello 2023, 9:54–10:00), gesturing toward a more compassionate understanding of border crossing that contradicts purely legalistic interpretations.

The video draws a crucial distinction between two categories of border crossers: “give-ups,” who walk up to agents and ask for asylum, and “getaways,” who slip past the legal authorities. “Give-ups” are coached to toss their IDs and recite a story, while “getaways” stay unknown. “We’re probably never gonna know until it’s too late, because somebody’s gonna get hurt” (Santenello, 2023, 27:23–27:41) says Sheriff Wilmot. Drones and sensors spot both types, but only the first are bussed to processing; the second trigger chases. The border itself becomes a machine that labels one person a harmless petitioner and the next a hidden threat. Here, the lack of data becomes a kind of fear in itself; an epistemological threat tied to national security and local safety.

Santenello's documentation of this distinction also invites reflection on how border infrastructure and surveillance technologies themselves produce these categories. Drones, sensors, and real-time camera feeds are shown as capable of detecting movement but incapable of resolving intent (Santenello, 2023 04:04). The sheriff’s team uses this data to trace the paths of both groups, yet the very act of detection triggers different institutional responses: rescue for some, enforcement for others. In this context, the “give-up” becomes a figure of bureaucratic management to be processed, housed, and released, while the “getaway” becomes a specter of ungoverned movement. These dual portrayals define the roles in the migration drama: the compliant petitioner versus the elusive intruder. Both are shaped by possible terrible conditions, but they are narrated through frames of risk, legality, and moral judgment that continue to hide the structural forces driving displacement and movement. As such, Santenello’s lens captures not just individuals crossing borders but a system sorting human beings into legible and illegible categories of belonging. Wilmot says cartels game this system. They push waves of “give-ups” through one gap to “inundate Border Patrol… so they can get their narcotics and the other humans smuggling” across elsewhere (Santenello, 2023, 32:09–32:26). The tactic turns some migrants into unwitting decoys, showing how a humanitarian flow can mask a parallel economy of drugs and trafficking.

A closer look at the formal construction of these videos reveals how camera technology and framing choices contribute to their rhetorical effect. Santenello frequently uses a GoPro or handheld camera while walking alongside his guides, producing a sense of intimacy and shared movement through space. Wide shots of the landscape convey the scale and exposure of the border terrain, while close--ups during interviews emphasize the authority and confidence of law enforcement

narrators. Migrants, when shown, are often filmed from a distance or from behind, visually reinforcing their status as observed subjects. The sequencing of patrol footage with interview segments creates a rhythm in which testimony validates imagery, and imagery, in turn, anchors testimony in a tangible geography.

Migration, in this framing, becomes both a humanitarian event and a form of asymmetrical warfare, where the vulnerable are used to mask the movement of smuggled goods. Such depictions complicate public understanding of migrant agency and reduce individuals seeking refuge into strategic "decoys." In capturing this discourse, Santenello's video represents humanitarianism, enforcement, and criminal economies simplistic moral narratives and shows how systemic neglect and the border politics produce conditions where human beings become tools within structures of survival and exploitation.

The lack of direct migrant testimony in Santenello's videos also raises questions about consent and the ethics of representation. Migrants often appear as distant figures, crossing a field, boarding a bus, or waiting in custody, without context about their identities, motivations, or perspectives. While this may be partly due to legal restrictions and safety concerns, the effect is a visual economy where migrants remain peripheral and voiceless. This reproduces some of the same limitations seen in legacy media, where migrant agency is subsumed under institutional or enforcement narratives. The result is a paradox: although Santenello's platform promises immediacy and unfiltered access, the absence of migrant voices means that viewers encounter migration largely through the accounts of those tasked with managing or policing it.

In this respect, Santenello's work diverges from legacy television largely in its distribution model and presentational style rather than in its representational hierarchy. The guiding voices mirror the institutional gatekeepers of mainstream outlets, while migrant perspectives remain indirect or ambient. What is gained in visual access to border spaces is counterbalanced by the persistence of a top--down narrative structure. Although his other videos often foreground the voices of underrepresented local communities—such as African Americans in urban housing projects, Jewish communities, or Amish groups—the migrant remains a notable exception, with their presence mediated rather than self-articulated. This may be due in part to practical factors such as language barriers, migrants' reluctance to appear on camera, or potential legal consequences of speaking publicly. More importantly, it reflects the logic of Santenello's citizen journalism, in which the border is primarily described through the perspectives of other American citizens. In this framing, the migrant is positioned as out of reach and out of focus, while the border itself becomes the central subject, belonging to the host rather than the visitor. As a result, the issue shifts from being about the migrant to being about the border, lending the videos a more conservative tone.

3.2. The quiet(er) frontier: The northern border

Peter Santenello's 2024 video "At US/Canada Border With Sheriff's Office (exclusive access)" provides an examination of the migration dynamics along the U.S.-Canadian border, through the eyes of yet another local law enforcement. Major Leon from the Sheriff's Department serves as the primary voice, guiding viewers through the realities of border enforcement. Notably, Leon highlights the contrast with the southern border, describing the northern area as quieter yet increasingly vulnerable. He highlights the difficulty of monitoring such a large region: "Border Patrol is absolutely outnumbered up here. They don't have enough staff to really do it. It's tough" (2024a, 4:38).

A significant narrative point in the video emerges as Major Leon reflects on changes over time, recalling how upon joining law enforcement, he was assured he'd never need to use his weapon in this seemingly peaceful region (2024a, 26:14–26:20) and how this prophecy has failed. Leon emphasizes a transformation of increased criminality, particularly drug trafficking and illegal border crossings, reshaping perceptions of security and stability along the northern frontier.

Leon warns that smugglers exploit the supposedly quiet U.S.–Canada borders. He acknowledges the ease with which individuals illegally cross from Canada into the U.S., highlighting that human smugglers regulated both migrant flows and illegal activities such as drug trafficking and weapon smuggling. For instance, he notes the troubling economic dynamics, stating, "any pistol pretty much will fetch thousands and thousands of dollars in Canada," indicating profitable reasons for criminal activity crossing the border (2024a, 16:25–16:38).

The broader implications raised by Major Leon revolve around critical gaps in border security infrastructure and the practical challenges faced by local law enforcement. With a surge of migrants entering through the northern border, he explains how migrants use tourist visas into Canada as entry points to subsequently enter the U.S. illegally (2024a, 05:14). The community impacts are noticeable, influencing residents' daily lives and perceptions of safety, leading to a notable shift where local residents now consistently "keep [their] doors locked" due to increasing uncertainty (2024a, 18:35–18:42). Through these observations, Leon illustrates how assumptions of national and regional stability, once unquestioned in the northern geographies of the United States, are being rewritten.

Additionally Major Leon connects the decrease in willingness to pursue law enforcement careers directly to broader cultural and political shifts, particularly citing the impacts of recent movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM). According to Leon, a societal shift has occurred in which police officers have increasingly been portrayed negatively, reducing both morale within departments and public interest in joining law enforcement: "We've had some sort of movement

in law enforcement the last four or five years to where overnight law enforcement became the bad guy… we're now the problem. It wasn't so much that people were breaking the law. It's the fact that we were holding them accountable" (2024a, 27:34–27:45). He argues that these negative portrayals have made law enforcement a less appealing career and departments are struggling to attract qualified candidates (2024a, 39:33). This shift, he suggests, ultimately leads to reduced recruitment standards, creating a cycle where fewer highly qualified individuals enter the profession, thus further complicating efforts to maintain effective and respected law enforcement.

3.3. The dispersed border: Interior U.S.

In Peter Santenello's another video from 2024, "Inside the Massachusetts Nobody Talks About", the geographic focus shifts significantly; from the typical border towns associated with migration narratives toward interior U.S. states, specifically Central Massachusetts. This relocation highlights migration as a distributed national issue rather than merely a border concern. Santenello's local guide, Gerald, introduces viewers to towns quietly hosting migrants in state--contracted hotels, revealing tensions rooted in secrecy, unjust resource distribution, and perceived injustices against local populations. The video includes high number former commercial hotels turned into shelters: "It's just interesting that we're in Central Massachusetts, one small region and we're coming across place, after place, after place, and that's what this video turned into. Sorry for those looking for the wine and cheese tour." (2024b, 36:23-36:30). Later in the video, a covert conversation with a hotel employee reinforces the claim that hotels are indeed predominantly housing migrants rather than local homeless people (2024b, 38:29), paralleling to the local frustrations about transparency and equity.

The intentional removal or concealment of signage from migrant hotels (2024b, 17:32) emerges as a symbol of institutional secrecy. Employees' inability to speak publicly, due to employment policies, deepens local suspicion and discontent. Such practices fuel a broader narrative of mistrust, which Santenello emphasizes by contrasting the obscured hotel conditions with his own transparent, direct questioning as a YouTuber, a role he ironically suggests is now necessary due to a failing traditional media landscape. This framing positions migration as a hidden crisis with significant national implications, circulated across communities that feel inadequately informed or consulted about the resulting social and economic impacts.

Moreover, this portrayal of migration into inner US features broader societal divides within Massachusetts. The narrative juxtaposes wealthy areas with struggling communities, demonstrating gaps in living standards, economic

opportunity, and civic engagement. Santenello's exploration highlights how migration policies, even in apparently prosperous states, can worsen existing inequalities and lead to community polarization. Through these local stories, migration is reframed not only as a distant border phenomenon but as an immediate reality affecting everyday lives across the United States, strengthening debates over national identity, resource distribution, and governmental accountability.

3.4. Policy time-lapse: The southern border in 2025

In his recent video titled "US/Mexico Border with Arizona Sheriff – What's It Like Now?" (May 3, 2025), Peter Santenello revisits Sheriff Leon Wilmot of Yuma County, to explore the rapidly changing dynamics along the U.S.-Mexico border, particularly highlighting how political administrations shape migration trends. This follow-up episode exposes a critical turning point of migration surge between the Trump and Biden presidencies, offering evidence of how federal migration policies directly influence local security conditions, migrant behaviors, and community welfare.

Sheriff Wilmot's reflections illuminate how migration numbers and associated humanitarian issues respond to changes in the political landscape. The re-election of Donald Trump coincided with a drop in recorded asylum seekers. Wilmot connects the decrease in migrant deaths to the political rhetoric and policy stance of the Trump administration: "The main thing is I don't have people dying in the desert right now... We haven't had any calls for people that were abandoned" (2025, 1:18-1:24). This direct connection reveals the effectiveness of political messaging in shaping migration decisions, with migrants rapidly changing their actions based on the perceived severity or leniency of U.S. immigration policy.

Interestingly, despite widespread public perception of policy differences between Trump and Biden, Wilmot notes considerable continuity in border security measures. During Biden's presidency, construction of border barriers continued, though less publicly acknowledged. Wilmot points to new border walls built under President Biden (2025, 2:36-2:42). Such actions indicate a bipartisan consensus on physical border infrastructure, driven not only by political pressures but also by localized economic concerns, such as agriculture contamination that Wilmot repeatedly described to be caused by migrant trespassing. Thus, border policy is located in between partisan rhetoric and pragmatic local realities.

The significant human and economic consequences of migration policy are captured in the accounts provided by Yuma's healthcare officials. Santenello highlights the strain placed upon local infrastructure, particularly the hospital system. A hospital representative talks about the financial burdens resulting from caring for migrants, noting unpaid charges totaling "$26 million" in 2022 alone

(2025, 1:15:42). The hospital's situation illustrates the ripple effects of federal migration policy choices on local communities, often overlooked in broader policy debates. The situation creates tension within the community, as local citizens experience disruption in their healthcare services, complicating perceptions of migration further.

Another critical perspective in Santenello's narrative emerges through the account of Hector, a recently retired Border Patrol agent. His testimony offers a critique of administrative policies under the Biden era, specifically explaining how the Border Patrol's role shifted from enforcement to predominantly migrant processing duties. Hector remarks, "We went from being an enforcement agency to being part of a smuggling organization" (2025, 25:52-26:01), pointing to a crisis of professional integrity and morale within the agency. His statement exposes not only operational challenges but also ethical and systemic dilemmas resulting from policy-driven decisions on resource distribution.

Sheriff Wilmot repeatedly emphasizes the primary role of political messaging in shaping migrant behaviors. Trump's promises of strict border enforcement quickly discouraged illegal crossings, significantly reducing migrant flows: "Everybody, cartels, everybody throughout the world was hearing what Trump was saying... he said he was going to secure the border and there were gonna be consequences, it stopped" (2025, 16:16). This insight depicts migration as highly sensitive to perceived enforcement difficulty, with migrants responding swiftly to signals from U.S. leadership about the openness or hostility of border conditions.

Moreover, the financial implications for U.S. taxpayers resulting from inconsistent migration policies are staggering. Wilmot notes that each Border Patrol migrant-processing tent costs taxpayers "$500,000 per day (2025, 18:26), stressing the extensive financial commitments involved. Additionally, significant ethical questions arise, notably regarding the loss and inadequate tracking of unaccompanied minors (2025, 19:03), highlighting deep systemic flaws in humanitarian oversight during periods of heightened migration. These financial and ethical challenges demand consideration within broader immigration policy discourse.

Local political dynamics also shift considerably in response to these national migration issues. Wilmot observes how traditionally Democratic-voting communities, like Yuma County, have turned significantly Republican, mostly driven by frustrations over perceived chaos resulting from immigration policies (2025, 46:24-46:30). The observation is similar to national trends, exemplifying a local-level rejection of policies perceived as ineffective in addressing migration--related disruptions, thus illustrating how national migration policies can realign local political landscapes.

3.5. A rhetoric of witnessing: Walls, gaps, and the re-mapping of recent migration to U.S.

The series therefore frames the border, such as the wall fully built, partly erected, or absent altogether, as a policy device whose function depends on the speaker who points to it. For asylum seekers, its steel panels suggest a place to surrender and petition, yet the same shot casts them as a latent threat to sovereignty (Santenello 2023a). County sheriffs invoke the structure as both shield and accounting ledger, while Border Patrol voices, heard only in post-retirement interviews, report that the current regime leaves them processing paperwork rather than enforcing law (Santenello 2025). For Cartels, the wall is about adjusting fees and footpaths to whatever openings remain (Santenello 2021). Local citizens, whether residents in Yuma or taxpayers in central Massachusetts, encounter it through downstream costs such as hospital deficits and hotel contracts, reading unfinished sections as evidence of federal abandonment (Santenello 2024b). Positioned between these groups, Santenello acts as a mediator whose camera supplies each actor a voice without adopting an open policy stance; in doing so, he turns the border's presence into the organizing reference against which migrant, enforcer, and resident alike define their roles.

While the series reaches millions of viewers on YouTube, the intended audience appears to be a hybrid public: individuals skeptical of mainstream media narratives, those interested in law enforcement perspectives, and viewers seeking behind--the-scenes access to contested spaces. The comments sections of Santenello's videos suggest that many followers share a curiosity about "how things really are" at the border, the way they might witness if they had the trip themselves. Here, the presence of the citizen traveler/journalist resonates with the position of the average audience who theoretically can be the witness. But Santenello's position as the video maker also brings power embedded in his position. By privileging law enforcement voices, the content tends to resonate with audiences predisposed to view migration as a matter of security and policy enforcement rather than a human rights concern, even as it invites debate among a broader, politically diverse online community.

Recent migration in Santenello's playlist functions less as a single flow than as a system of transactions, risks, and reallocations that extend beyond. At the southern border, Sheriff Leon Wilmot's running price sheet—"six to fifteen grand a head" for cartel passage—presents migration first as a market in human mobility, one that converts nationality into cost points and funnels those payments toward criminal logistics (Santenello 2023a, 2:09–2:36). The wall here is an inventory dock: some people ("give-ups") use it to enter U.S. custody, others ("get-aways") treat gaps as off-hours delivery lanes, and both strategies are coordinated by smugglers who

tailor routes to whatever infrastructure or staffing shortfalls appear on a given day (Santenello 2023a, 18:11–18:25).

Farther north, where no fence interrupts, migration reemerges as an under--observed exchange. Major Leon notes that Indian and Senegalese asylum seekers come south while firearms move north, each traffic stream exploiting the same unpatrolled mileage (Santenello 2024a, 15:55–16:38). In this quiet zone, migrants are framed less as visible competitors. The absence of a barrier, rather than its breach, becomes the focal problem.

Inside Massachusetts hotels, migration appears again, this time as a budgetary strain diffused across the interior. When Gerald points to stripped-out signage and sealed lips of hotel staff, he identifies a policy of concealment that relocates the "border" to suburban parking lots while distancing decision-makers from local taxpayers (Santenello 2024b, 12:22–13:28). Here the migrant is recast as a silent tenant whose presence is felt through state invoices rather than public asylum claims. Hospitals in Yuma report parallel costs ($23 million in unreimbursed care for 2022 alone) showing that the economic pressure of migration travels the same routes as people do (Santenello 2023a, 51:16–51:29).

Across these geographies the roles remain consistent. Migrants travel between priced commodities at the wall, unknowns in the forest, and hidden neighbors in the hotel corridor. Cartels and guides act as logistical planners who adapt instantly to policy or terrain changes. Local law enforcement voices, from sheriffs to border patrols, translate those adaptations into narratives of burden and vulnerability for viewers, while Border Patrol representatives, when they speak at all, lament a mission drift from enforcement to paperwork (Santenello 2025, 26:01). Citizens surface as downstream payers of the unresolved costs, whether through county jail budgets or hospital write-offs.

Santenello's camera stitches these settings together, portraying contemporary migration not as a linear south-to-north march but as a journey shaped by infrastructure gaps, legal loopholes, and federal messaging shifts. In that journey, the existence or non-existence of a wall determines which aspect of the system becomes visible: marketplace, data void, or hidden subsidy. The series presents migration as a national logistics system, unevenly regulated, highly monetized, and felt locally wherever the camera roams.

While Santenello frames himself as an "ordinary citizen" and neutral observer, his position inevitably shapes what the audience sees and hears. As a white male U.S. citizen with secure legal status, he moves through border zones with freedoms and access not available to the people he films. His encounters largely center on law enforcement officers, local residents, and other American intermediaries, while migrants remain peripheral—visible in the frame but rarely addressed directly.

Whether because of language barriers, the reluctance of asylum seekers to speak publicly, or the legal risks of doing so, the result is a narrative in which the border is explained through the perspectives of those who govern or inhabit it, rather than those crossing it. This approach positions the border as an institution of the host society, with migrants appearing as passing figures in a story about the nation's boundaries rather than agents of their own journeys.

4. Discussion: Algorithmic gatekeeping & third-space politics

Across *The Border Series* Santenello constructs an epistemology of migration around the concepts of authenticity, intimacy, and community; the qualities that Burgess and Green observe to give YouTube its distinctive narrative power over mainstream media (2018). Although he does not give migrants an extended on-camera voice; sheriffs, residents, and smugglers speak for—or about—them, creating what looks factual yet indeed is carefully patterned through repetition, spatial indications, and moral hierarchy. The result is a designed soft-power story: videos that narrate the nation back to itself while redrawing the semiotic border of who has a voice and who is silenced.

This absence of migrant voices also raises questions about how Santenello negotiates consent and the ethics of representation. In the same Arizona video, Sheriff Wilmot describes cartel control in the region relaying what he says are the cartel's own words (Santenello 2024b, 16:49–16:53), yet no migrants or smugglers are interviewed to confirm or challenge this account. A similar pattern appears in the northern border episode with Major Leon, where the narrative of rising illegal crossings and drug smuggling is constructed entirely through the voices of law enforcement and local residents (Santenello 2024d, 04:12–04:37). By filtering these stories through institutional intermediaries, the videos maintain a power asymmetry: the migrants are present as images, statistics, or case examples, but not as speaking subjects. In this sense, the practice risks replicating one of the "damaging journalistic approaches" of legacy news (representing vulnerable migrant groups without allowing them a narrative agency) even while claiming to offer a more authentic, ground-level perspective.

While Santenello frames his work as an alternative to legacy news coverage, certain aspects of his videos parallel traditional television reporting in ways that risk reproducing its limitations. In both formats, migrants often remain visible but voiceless, positioned as background to the accounts of law enforcement or local officials. In the Arizona interview with Sheriff Wilmot, for instance, the camera lingers on a group of "give-ups" waiting for processing while Wilmot explains procedures, but no proper conversation takes place with them (Santenello

2024b, 14:22–14:38). This visual arrangement echoes the familiar legacy-media trope where migrants are shown as silent subjects whose experiences are mediated through official commentary. The absence of their own words or perspectives means that, despite the informal, participatory style of the channel, agency over representation remains firmly with the narrator and institutional voices. Although the migrants remain largely voiceless throughout the series, its reason might be that many are asylum seekers who are not allowed to or in the position of giving a speech.

While the videos avoid open political positioning, the comment sections often reveal the ideological work being done around them. When stories (re)appear in YouTube videos, Sabina Perrino observes that talks such as on migration are swiftly recast in the comments, where racial slurs and jokes tighten an "us-versus--them" divide over who is deemed a legitimate citizen (2017, 261). In Santenello's threads, legal immigrants voice resentment over social-service disparities, others use law-and-order rhetoric, and critics frame the videos as humanitarian warnings, all re-encoding the narrative that is being constructed. At the same time the very visibility of those reactions is filtered by the platform itself: downstream actors, writes Siciliano, now "extend platforms' gatekeeping power by propagating an orientation toward metrics and algorithms" (2023, 2). Authorship is therefore doubled: Santenello provides the first-order story, but YouTube's recommendation engine and comment affordances generate its afterlife, turning the platform into a secondary yet powerful narrator.

Santenello's audience plays a decisive role in this process. Given the millions of views his videos attract, it is not only large but also active in shaping the circulation and reception of his content. Predominantly English-speaking, this audience aligns with the linguistic framing of the videos and is positioned to reinforce the narratives presented, either by amplifying them through sharing or by engaging directly in the comment sections. In doing so, viewers become co-constructors of meaning: their reactions, endorsements, and criticisms feed back into the visibility and perceived legitimacy of Santenello's work. The power of the videos therefore lies not solely in their production but in this audience's willingness to sustain and propagate them, making them an integral component of his platform's influence.

For instance the comment section of the *At US/Mexico Border With Arizona Sheriff (exclusive access)* video, much of Santenello's audience views migration primarily through the lens of legality, national security, and cultural cohesion. Some frame unauthorized migration as a solvable political problem: "This is a political problem which could (and should) be solved tomorrow if only we had the will as a nation" (Santenello 2023). Others contrast "legal" with "illegal" migration, often invoking personal histories to underscore the difference: "I'm

actually a first-gen immigrant myself. But the difference is I stood in line and came in legally" (Santenello 2023). Several commenters link migration to strains on public services—"The schools have been impacted too… teaching must be overwhelming now" (Santenello 2023)—or to law-and-order concerns, expressing support for the sheriff's enforcement role. At the same time, there are occasional acknowledgments of the historical role of immigration in the United States, though these are often qualified by present-day anxieties: "This country was built on immigrations of Europeans and Asian… but our needs… were different from today" (Santenello 2023). Overall, the comment threads reveal a largely skeptical, enforcement-oriented stance toward migration, where policy solutions are framed around restriction, regulation, and cultural assimilation rather than humanitarian or rights-based approaches.

Ultimately, Santenello's series enacts a form of digital journalism. The videos encode what Stuart Hall famously called a "preferred reading," one that invites viewers to share the host's guided curiosity while withholding hard policy prescriptions. Hall reminds us that any message is open to "negotiated or oppositional decodings" as audiences filter it through their own frameworks of knowledge (2005, 127). We see the very same qualities in Santenello's audience: some decode his footage as proof of law-and-order failure, others as testimony to migrant resilience. Presenting migration through encounters, feelings, and impressions is therefore not a narrative weakness but a strategic opening; one that lets multiple publics, armed with opposing politics, recognize their own concerns inside a single GoPro frame.

By casting himself as a "citizen-traveler," he leans on the micro-celebrity tactic Rebecca Lewis calls strategic intimacy where YouTubers construct an 'authentic' micro-celebrity persona to reveal themselves as trustworthy alternatives to the sensational, opaque legacy press and mainstream media (2019, 13). This can be seen as part of a larger picture of social media where users can simultaneously debate and shape everyday politics (Highfield 2016, 153). As his view counts rise, so does his visibility and influence. Because his videos engage directly with sociopolitical debates, he increasingly occupies a space once held by traditional journalists; political discourse is now within his reach.

To succeed, however, creators must first secure visibility. Crystal Abidin notes that this can be achieved by a 'calibrated amateurism', a crafted relatability that convinces viewers that the interaction is sincere (2020, 83). This shows the new changing aspects of the media. As contemporary journalism now prizes new media dynamics where ¬high audience metrics, interactive formats, and visible responsiveness are appreciated over the older benchmark of institutional authority (Meijer 2020, 2336). Peter Santenello's channel exemplifies that audience turn: he

frames each episode as an on-the-ground encounter, provides topics that resonate in the comment-thread, and foregrounds the relatable, handheld style viewers say they trust and find sincere. High view counts and lively discussions are not treated as mere popularity markers but as proof that user-centered storytelling can expand public understanding without necessarily "dumbing down" the news; they signal success within an emerging innovation discourse rather than a retreat from journalistic substance.

Peter Santenello perfectly exemplifies the "journalistic YouTuber" profile that Lichtenstein, Herbers, and Bause describe. Like the German creators in their study, he mixes a monitorial impulse by showing what is happening on the ground with a personable, informal delivery that invites viewers into the story (2021, 1106––1111). His episodes balance fact-gathering (statistics, on-scene interviews) and an accommodating tone (first-person asides), thereby applying legacy journalistic aims, such as informing and contextualizing into a style optimized for YouTube's audience expectations. Large view counts and lively comment threads thus become signals of public engagement, while the channel's responsiveness to feedback demonstrates how narrative authority today can develop as much from interactive, personality-driven storytelling as from institutional news routines.

From another perspective, Santenello as a traveler at home, an unusual identity that grants him a hybrid position of both being outsider and insider. The videos describe migration as a space where the power of defining the self and the other, and also the hybrid, becomes visible. Peter Santenello's promise to "investigate America without bias" relates to what Mary Louise Pratt calls autoethnographic privilege: a capacity to mix the language of mainstream news with local vernaculars and, in doing so, present a self-portrait that speaks both for and to the culture it depicts. Autoethnography, Pratt notes, involves "selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis … to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding" (1991, 35). Because Santenello is white and U.S.-born, that intervention carries the weight of insider authority, shaping which faces appear in close-up and which remain off-screen. This asymmetry is not merely a matter of access; it opens what Homi Bhabha calls a "territory of translation" where social difference can be re-narrated. "What is required," Bhabha writes, "is to demonstrate another territory of translation… to rehistoricize the moment of the emergence of the sign… in the field of cultural difference—not cultural diversity" (1988, 17). Santenello's videos attempt to perform this rehistoricization, particularly when addressing contested sites like American borders.

Santenello's border videos framed by handheld intimacy and testimonial voice allow us to witness a discursive construction of social reality (Bhabha 1988, 17).

These videos do not merely depict migrants; they produce them as subjects within a tensioned media narrative. His representations operate in what Bhabha describes as a third space, a hybrid zone where power is negotiated and identities are not fixed but reconstituted. For example, Santenello's interviews with law enforcement figures like Sheriff Wilmot or with active human smugglers reveal the ambiguous status of the migrant, not as the pure victim or criminal, but as a figure that crosses the border in both a literal and symbolic sense.

Santenello's border videos visualize the third space as a contact zone where cultural signs are continually renegotiated through unequal encounters. When Sheriff Leon Wilmot values migrant passage at "six to fifteen grand a head," the wall behind him becomes a marketplace that redefines migrants as commodities while positioning local law enforcement as fiscal guardian (Santenello 2023, 2:09–2:36). Later when an asylum seeker drops a passport before the wall and is coached to dial 911, turning humanitarian response into a cartel tactic and shifting the sheriff's role from host to reluctant logistician (Santenello 2023, 24:07–24:21). Within a single setting, identities change: the migrant moves from victim to strategic decoy, the official from protector to pawn, and the unseen smuggler from outlaw to backstage director. Santenello's handheld camera records these positions, showing how authority and vulnerability exchange places whenever a wall, a wristband, or an emergency number enters the frame, thus illustrating Bhabha's argument that cultural meaning "emerges in-between" the parties who contest it (1994, 2).

These shifting roles are best understood through Foucault's notion that power circulates through the smallest interactions before setting into larger social truths. Foucault defines power as "reaching into the very grain of individuals, touching their bodies and their actions at the level of small-scale mechanisms" (1980, 39) and operating in its capillary forms. In the third space that opens between camera and subject, power therefore is on who gets to assign particular roles. A migrant becomes a "give-up" or a "get-away" only once a sheriff applies the label, just as the sheriff's own authority dissolves the moment humanitarian demands exceed his resources. Such exchanges show border power shifting among migrants, locals, officials, and viewers rather than resting with one side.

From another perspective, the power Santenello acquires as the content maker is of productive, rather than repressive type. Power, Foucault argues, is not simply held but enacted in networks; it "traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (1980, 119). In this sense, Santenello's GoPro becomes a power tool in a new media network that redistributes representational power, no longer solely in the hands of state media or institutions, but emerging from the relations amongst the citizen-narrator, the platform, and the audience. This is not simply the result of new technology, but

the consequence of a shifting ideological space. The border, in Santenello's lens, is a discursive zone where both migrant agency and structural control coexist.

Unlike traditional news segments that frame migrants chiefly as electoral liabilities or security threats, Peter Santenello's videos portray the border as a shared social arena in which ordinary citizens, officials, and newcomers negotiate claims to ownership and belonging. His handheld interviews with sheriffs, hotel staff, and asylum seekers turn viewing into a platform about borders, inviting audiences to assess who deserves protection and who has the right or the duty to provide it. In this sense the channel parallels what Thea Rabe calls digital citizen humanitarianism: networked practices in which citizens use digital acts to claim rights for migrants and, simultaneously, for themselves, while bypassing formal institutions of aid and news (2023, 550–552). By streaming encounters from a motel corridor in Massachusetts or a patrol road in Yuma, Santenello likewise mobilizes loosely linked audiences to witness, discuss, and sometimes assist people who fall between legal categories, thereby relocating humanitarian judgment from courtrooms and newsrooms to the comment thread.

At the same time, the visual language and narrative techniques in the videos such as his use of handheld GoPro footage and lack of heavy editing function as claims to authenticity. However, this supposed neutrality masks a critical paradox: Santenello's claim to merely "presenting the story" positions him, as Foucault might argue, in a subtle yet powerful mode of discursive authority. Despite his rejection of journalistic status, Santenello constructs the narrative by selecting scenes, voices, and moments that shape public perception. In this way, his channel illustrates how power decentralizes from institutional media platforms but does not disappear; rather, it redistributes through digital micro-celebrities like himself, who occupy the hybrid space between citizen and journalist, observer, and narrator.

If we read Santenello's channel through the lens of participatory culture, the power shift is clear: curating the public conversation is no longer the newsroom's prerogative but "a collective process" in which "media producers and consumers … interact with each other according to a new set of rules" (Jenkins 2006, 3). Viewers do more than watch his border rides; they annotate them, argue over them, and suggest next stops, embodying what Jenkins calls a form of "collective intelligence" in which "each of us knows something" and the pieces come together only when audiences provide their insights (Jenkins 2006, 3–4). By answering comments and incorporating viewer tips into later uploads, Santenello turns spectators into co-authors, positioning the GoPro traveler not just as a lone narrator but as the hub of a crowd-sourced editorial network.

Roland Barthes' postmodern explanation about the position of the reader and the author reveals a similar power dynamics. Interpretive control changes hands

from the person who writes to the one who reads. Santenello performs a digital version of that maneuver. His position as the citizen journalist is also a symbolic withdrawal from authorship, presenting himself instead as a neutral camera-bearer whose footage awaits the viewer's verdict. The audience, gathered in the comment thread, presents Barthes's 'reader'. In this arrangement, the viewer's labor, such as liking, disliking, subtitling, and remixing, completes the text, while Santenello's neutrality secures him the status of a mediator rather than a final authority. The very platform metrics that record audience engagement (thumbs-up counts, reply chains, playlist shares) thus become material evidence of Barthes's thesis: meaning is generated downstream, after the video's release, in a collaborative space where the author's voice is only one data point among many.

The function of the digital platform here is essential. YouTube not only circulates Santenello's videos to millions; it also stores what Kessler and Schäfer describe as a hybrid information-management system, where user uploads, tags, and playlists build an archive (Kessler and Schäfer 2009, 287). That participatory archive of reactions, likes and algorithmic boosts extend the border's third space into an after-image, a user-curated collection of competing truths: a contested arena where migrants become unstable signs of crisis, compassion, or criminality depending on who is watching and clicking.

In sum, Santenello's videos generate a digital border discourse in which Bhabha's third space is at once physical crossing-point and symbolic construct. The playlist itself becomes a portable third space, travelling across feeds while carrying the clash of sovereignty and mobility in every replay. Reframing theory inside this space of cultural difference reminds us that digital video is not just a window onto migration, but a new regime of power, meaning, and participation through which the border itself is continually rewritten. The third space frames these encounters as sites where categories like legal/illegal are renegotiated in real time. Bhabha's point is that critique must relocate itself inside cultural difference, not merely catalogue diversity; on camera, the supposedly fixed binary of legal/illegal is held in suspension; the indeterminacy that defines third-space rhetoric. Bhabha further reminds us that any theoretical critique must be re-historicised in moments where new signs and subjects emerge (Bhabha 1994, 32). Santenello's uploads reveal precisely such instants: each handheld sequence freezes a border interaction, re-mediates it for millions, and feeds it back into the algorithmic public where new meanings circulate. Re-historicizing those moments within the field of cultural difference—not as static diversity but as live hybridity—allows us to see YouTube not simply as a depiction of migration stories but as a site where the very grammar of belonging is under construction.

5. Conclusion: Border spectacles after the media turn

This study sets out to learn how Peter Santenello's *Border Series* shifts the work of migration reporting from legacy news desks to a YouTube setting ruled by watch time, comments, and recommendations. Close readings showed that each episode moves viewers from a visual shock at the border to a closing invitation to debate. That narration turns walls, forests, and hotels into signs about migration. The GoPro, small and informal, lets Santenello enter tense spaces while claiming he is "just looking," a stance that disarms sources and frames the host as a witness rather than a judge.

The series makes clear that borders are not only lines on a map. They are sites where cartels quote prices, wristbands mark one's safety, and hospital or hotel invoices reveal hidden costs. The wall becomes evidence for every speaker. Sheriffs show it as a shield, cartels treat it as a toll booth, citizens see it as unfinished work that pushes bills onto local budgets. In front of the same wall a migrant can shift from victim to strategic decoy in minutes, proving that roles at the border are fluid.

Platform logic expands these shifts. YouTube gives Santenello instant reach and provides a public archive of reactions. Viewers correct facts, add local details, and argue values, turning each upload into an open newsroom. Algorithms rank the clips, comments sort them, and the host answers the most urgent replies. Gatekeeping now happens twice: first when Santenello edits and titles a video, and again when the platform decides who sees it next. This double filter shows how participatory culture and metric culture merge.

Theoretical frames help explain these moves. Bhabha's third space appears whenever migrants and locals share a frame; meaning arises in that in-between zone rather than on either side. Foucault's idea of capillary power explains how labels like "give-up" travel from the sheriff's lips to viewer perceptions, helping to construct a meaning for migration, suggesting what Barthes reminds us about final word belonging to the audience.

This study's findings show that Santenello's personal biography and positionality as a white American male, former expatriate, and independent digital creator shape both his access to border spaces and the perspectives that dominate his videos. His "ordinary man" stance resonates with audiences who see themselves as potential witnesses, yet it also conceals the asymmetry of a position that allows entry to law enforcement, residents, and other institutional actors while leaving migrants largely voiceless. This recurring silencing, whether due to legal constraints, language barriers, or editorial choice, aligns his coverage in part with legacy media practices even as he frames it as an alternative. Notably, this absence of voice is not a constant across his channel. In videos about other less represented American groups, speakers are given space to narrate their own

experiences. The contrast suggests that in the Border Series the focus remains less on the migrant's own account and more on the border as defined by host-society actors. Audience reception patterns, shaped both by Santenello's editorial decisions and by YouTube's algorithmic curation, further reveal how representation is negotiated not only through the camera but also through the platform's metric--driven ecosystem.

Taken together, the findings show a media form that is both journalistic and personal, both structured and open. Santenello does not replace traditional reporters, yet he proves that a low-cost device, a clear format, and a responsive comment field can move migration talk into new public zones. Future work should ask whether similar rules apply on platforms such as TikTok or Instagram, where clips are shorter and metrics move faster. For now, *The Border Series* stands as evidence that the story of who belongs in the United States is being drafted in real time by creators, algorithms, and audiences acting together.

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