



Colectivo de Medios Latinos: Collaborative Media Making for Latinx Communities in Response to COVID-19

By Mari Castañeda

I teach at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and this spring semester 2020 I taught a civic engagement course titled Latinx Media Studies. Our community partners were the producers of *Presencia* (<http://presencia.wgby.org>) a local bilingual production on WGBY, a PBS television affiliate in Western Massachusetts that serves the region. *Presencia* emerged three years ago when the producers heard again and again from Latinx community members that neither mainstream media or public media were addressing their information needs or producing content that showed the many positive contributions that the Latina/os, especially those in the Puerto Rican diaspora, were making in New England. Community members were becoming tired of constantly being mischaracterized in commercial media as threats and non-contributing individuals who lack deep cultural practices. In its third season, *Presencia* is making an important cultural intervention and I was excited when my class was able to partner with the deeply community-oriented crew at WGBY (New England Public Media) as well as Elizabeth Román, editor in chief of *El Pueblo Latino*.

As a scholar-activist committed to community engagement and its possibilities, I wanted to enact a Latinx community-academic praxis in our partnership that centered Latina/o lived experiences, social justice practices, and a reciprocal engagement that would highlight the social, political, cultural and economic conditions of resilient communities of color. We were driving to Springfield, Massachusetts every week once the spring semester was underway and making excellent progress with our Latinx community partnership when the COVID-19 health crisis really hit the United States; and thus, after March 13, UMass Amherst went into remote instruction. On our first day back to class (our Zoom class) after we switched to remote learning, our community partners and students engaged in a dialogue about the impact the pandemic, and the enactment of the Massachusetts stay-at-home advisory, was having in our personal lives and the various communities we're engaged with regularly. Vanessa Pabón-Hernandez, the executive producer of *Presencia*, reiterated the importance of media content especially for Latinos, and pointed out that distressingly, there was a dearth of COVID-19 information for Latinx communities, especially in Spanish or bilingually.

At the time that we met as a class, the growing number of coronavirus cases were skyrocketing in Boston and New York City, and the virus was especially hurting Black and Latinx communities. Over the course of a few weeks, it became clear that the virus was not only hurting individual people of color across the U.S. but ravaging entire communities. However, it was also increasingly becoming clear that Latinx

Spanish-speaking communities were not receiving the crucial information they needed regarding physical distancing, the importance of personal protective equipment such as facial masks and gloves, and the various symptoms people needed to watch for if they became ill. They were also not receiving information about unemployment support, essential worker safeguards, or housing rights in light of the pandemic. In response to this information vacuum, Vanessa announced in one of our class sessions that she and her media collaborators from the Western Massachusetts region were coming together to address the lack of communication for Latinos, and creating an online space to discuss life and death situations many were experiencing. For instance, Hampden County in Massachusetts, where WGBY is located in Springfield, currently has the highest number of COVID-19 deaths in the state although it represents the sixth highest county in terms of cases. Many of the deaths are those of Black and Latinx community members. The same holds true for Boston, New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The virus is devastating these communities because many are also essential workers at grocery stores, construction sites, health assistants, and custodial staff.

In response to this devastation and the need for real information emerged *Colectivo de Medios Latinos* (<https://colectivodemedioslatinos.wordpress.com/about/>). As one of the founders, our community partner Vanessa brought together other Latinx media producers and creators from various Western Massachusetts outlets such as *El Pueblo Latino*, *Holyoke Media*, and *Vaya con Muñoz* (WHMP). Using Zoom, Facebook, and other social media platforms, *Colectivo de Medios Latinos* has produced over twenty

video interviews with experts, advocates, and community members from a range of organizations. Nurses, elected officials, mortgage lenders, city staffers, and educators, just to name a few, were invited to discuss issues that were affecting everyone during the pandemic, but especially impacting Latinx communities. As part of the Latinx Media Studies course, the students partnered as paired teams to write short articles for *El Pueblo Latino* that would align with the episodes slated for *Presencia*, which in many cases also intersected with reports about the impact of COVID-19 on Latina families, housing instability, and immigration. Many of these issues were also being addressed in the episodes produced by *Colectivo de Medios Latinos*. This partnership and emergence of *Colectivo de Medios Latinos* have reinforced for me that Latinx communities, and others whose voices are not consistently or accurately represented in mainstream media, have the expertise and agency power to lead the creation of the media and communication systems that we want to see and absolutely need so our communities are thoroughly and deeply informed, especially at a local level. We've always had the collective knowledge and lived experience to become the social agents we want to be in the world, and the enactment of a Latinx community-academic praxis, which includes many past and present scholars, activists, community members, and students, is continuing that path towards social justice and critical engagement that we are following and continue to build.

