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### Public Television Plans A Network for Latinos

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In a move to take public broadcasting closer to Spanish-speaking viewers, executives are expected to announce today that a new network, **V-me**, will go on the air on March 5 in major American cities with large Latino populations. It will offer a mix of Spanish-language children's and adult programming with an educational focus.

This digital network is an unusual public-private partnership forged between the Educational Broadcasting Corporation, the parent of the New York public station WNET; the investment firm the Baeza Group; and the venture capital firm Syncom Funds. Educational Broadcasting will be a minority partner in the for-profit venture

An initial 18 public television stations, including WNET, which reach about 60 percent of Spanish speakers in the United States, have agreed to carry **V-me**'s programming on the spinoff channels that are the results of their conversion to a digital broadcast signal.

In the cities where the channel will be available, including Miami, Houston, Chicago and most of the major California markets, it will be seen over the air by viewers with digital-capable sets as well as on the digital tier of cable systems. **V-me**'s management is also pursuing broadcast via satellite.

The wide-ranging programming lineup, supported by underwriting and sponsorship messages but no ads, has just one telenovela, the staple of the commercial Spanish networks, Univision and Telemundo. Instead **V-me** will carry a mix of public television standards, like "Nature" and "Wide Angle," reformatted in Spanish, and programs acquired from Latin America and Spain.

PBS already offers Spanish-language audio tracks for a number of its children's shows, but not its primetime lineup, because of budget restrictions.

Carmen DiRienzo, the new network's president, said focus groups had shown that there was "a huge audience out there that is longing to see and feel and experience" Spanish-language public-television programming.

Ms. DiRienzo acknowledged the challenge of appealing to the diverse Latino populations in the United States, something the commercial Spanish-language networks have grappled with. But, she said, "What is wonderful is that we are attempting to create a platform where members of the diverse communities can come together, and speak to one another."

One-fourth of the programming will be original to the network, including a one-hour, nightly one-on-one interview program, "Viva Voz," that is designed as a national platform for discussion of issues important to Latinos. Affiliate stations will be able to incorporate local community programming.

The six hours of preschool shows will include "Plaza Sesamo," the Spanish version of "Sesame Street," which is also broadcast on the commercial network TeleFutura, and a Spanish-dubbed version of the animated "Franny's Feet," a PBS show that explores geography. Acquisitions include "Lunar Jim," which will be known as "Jim de la Luna," an animated series about a child astronaut, which is popular in Western Europe and Asia.

The sole telenovela, "Nuestro Barrio," will be shown as part of the daytime lineup of lifestyle shows. Ms. DiRienzo called it a "telenovela that's good for you." Created by a nonprofit housing organization in North Carolina, with partial funding from Freddie Mac, the show is intended to teach financial literacy in the context of a telenovela's high drama of family and social relationships, albeit without the sexual intrigue of many telenovelas.

Other daytime shows include "Los Niños en Su Casa," which teaches viewers how to care for preschoolers. Primetime will be a mix of biographies, documentaries and science. Each evening will be capped with the 10 o'clock "Viva Voz," with a rotating group of hosts to be named later. A movie, subtitled in English, will be shown each evening at 11.

The partners have fully financed the network for the three years that they project it will take to turn a profit, said Mario Baeza, founder and chairman of the Baeza Group. He declined to say how much money had been invested. Income is expected to come from the underwriting and sponsorships, as well as from the international syndication of the network's original programs, and merchandising of DVDs.

Mr. Baeza said in an interview that he had become interested in a public broadcasting network for Latinos years ago, when his children were young, and he searched, fruitlessly, for television programs they could watch in Spanish that had the same educational values as English-language public television.

A Cuban-American who will serve as **V-me**'s executive chairman, Mr. Baeza previously owned two ABC affiliates and founded the independent record label AJM, which, in a joint venture with Def Jam/Murder Inc., launched the career of the singer Ashanti. He would not be specific about the expected profits, except to say that the goal is "to earn a private equity-like return."

Ms. DiRienzo declined to name the sponsors that have already signed on. Mr. Baeza said the partners were "very aware" of the challenges of raising underwriting money from corporations, which have cut back on such media buys in recent years. But he said that **V-me** was "going to be a unique proposition in the Spanish-speaking world" and that it was in a solid position to attract companies that are eager to reach multicultural audiences.

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