



Television

# Latino TV Gets Serious

A new Spanish-language network hopes viewers will choose highbrow talk shows over trashy *telenovelas*.

BY ARIAN CAMPO-FLORES

FOR VIEWERS OF THE TWO MAIN Hispanic TV networks in America, the big decision each night comes down to this: do we watch a *telenovela* (soap opera), or do we watch a ... *telenovela*? Consider the 9 p.m., ET, Wednesday time slot. On Univision, you can catch "Mundo de Fieras" ("Love and Cruelty"), in which evil Demián plots to destroy his twin brother. On Telemundo, there's "Zorro: La Espada y La Rosa" ("Zorro: The Sword and the Rose"), an adaptation of the classic that combines horseback chases with lots of quivering, glistening flesh. If soaps aren't your thing, tough luck.

Until now, that is. A new Spanish-language network called V-me (pronounced "veh-meh," a play on "see me" in Spanish) hit the airwaves last week, promising to offer "intelligent entertainment." Its show for Wednesday at 9: "Creencias," a repurposed version of PBS's "Religion and Ethics Newsweekly" that featured pieces on home schooling and the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, Sudan. The network—a partnership between PBS's flagship Thirteen/WNET station in New York and private investors—will reach audiences

via digital spinoff channels of existing public-TV stations. So far, 18 channels have signed on in major markets like New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, where 60 percent of the nation's Hispanic homes are located. With that reach, V-me is now available in 28 million U.S. homes, a figure the network expects to grow to 50 million within a year. "The real key is distribution," says Mario Baeza of the Baeza Group, V-me's lead private investor and executive chairman who's owned several ABC affiliates and the record label that helped launch Ashanti.

Given the success of a network like Univision—which airs 29 of the 30 most-watched programs among Latinos ages 18

to 49—there's been little incentive to tinker with the formula. Yet Latino viewers and media critics have long clamored for more variety, particularly kids' shows. The dominant networks offer little such programming; in fact, Univision was ordered to pay a \$24 million fine—the largest ever levied by the Federal Communications Commission—for trying to classify one of its *telenovelas* as an educational children's show. When V-me conducted focus groups of Hispanics in five cities around the country, the same themes kept surfacing: they wanted more selection, more respect for their intelligence and more offerings that weren't just about Latinos.

V-me has responded with programming in four categories: kids, lifestyle, current affairs and movies. It includes original productions like "Viva Voz," a Charlie Rose-style interview show, and material adapted from popular PBS series like "Wide Angle" (V-me's president, Carmen DiRienzo, is a veteran of PBS's Thirteen in New York). About half of the programming is acquired from abroad, including a Canadian children's show called "Lunar Jim," made by the creators of "CSI." There's only one *telenovela*—and it delves into the decidedly unsexy world of financial planning.

The commercial networks aren't exactly quaking—especially since V-me's ties to public TV prevent it from accepting certain advertising (like public TV, it will have underwriters, though it hasn't disclosed them yet). "There's room for different types of programming," says Carlos Bardasano, Telemundo's executive vice president of entertainment. "It just shows that the market has matured and continued to grow." Perhaps V-me will prove, once and for all, that just because you're Hispanic, you don't have to watch *telenovelas*. ■



**CONTRASTS:** V-me's 'Viva Voz' (above) features interviews, while rival networks prefer saucy *telenovelas* like Univision's 'Mundo de Fieras' (right) and Telemundo's 'Dame Chocolate' (left)



	WEDNESDAY EVENING							
	7:00	7:30	8:00	8:30	9:00	9:30	10:00	10:30
<b>Telemundo</b>		<b>'Dame Chocolate'</b> Novela about a girl who inherits a fortune	<b>'Marina'</b> Novela chronicling the title character's life of love and loss		<b>'Zorro'</b> Novela adaptation featuring the legendary Latin hero, who protects the poor and sets hearts aflutter			<b>'Decisiones'</b> Real-life stories
<b>V-me</b>	<b>'Naturaleza Implacable'</b> Reality series about park rangers	<b>'¿Qué Sucedió?'</b> Big engineering projects that end in disaster	<b>'Zona de Peligro'</b> Real-life drama about emergency trauma units in urban hospitals and the life-and-death decisions they make		<b>'Creencias'</b> Features and profiles about religion and ethics	<b>'Ciencia en: The NewsHour'</b> Cutting-edge science features	<b>'Viva Voz'</b> Charlie Rose-style show featuring newsmakers and celebrities who are interviewed by a rotating cast of hosts	
<b>Univision</b>	<b>'Duelo de Pasiones'</b> Novela set on a coffee plantation in rural Mexico		<b>'La Fea Más Bella'</b> Novela about a girl who goes from ugly duckling to swan		<b>'Mundo de Fieras'</b> Globe-trotting novela full of passion and plotting		<b>'Don Francisco Presenta'</b> Talkfest showcasing Hispanic celebrities	