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Towns Opens Investigation into Minority Owned Radio Stations' Ratings Decline

Washington, DC – U.S. Representative Edolphus “Ed” Towns (D-NY), the Chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, has initiated an investigation into Arbitron, Inc.’s use of the Portable People Meter (PPM) amid allegations that methodological flaws with the device are resulting in the underrepresentation of radio listening preferences of minorities and certain age groups. The PPM is a device developed by Arbitron, Inc., to measure radio station listenership.

In a letter to Michael Copps, Acting Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Chairman Towns states that he has become concerned about the accuracy of the PPM after receiving complaints from sectors within the radio industry and state governments who assert that the PPM is undercounting minority radio listeners. To date, the PPM has not received the Media Ratings Council’s accreditation in nearly every market nationwide.

“I remain deeply concerned that without deliberate and timely investigations into this matter the increased use of the PPM may unfairly threaten the financial viability of minority targeted radio stations whose advertising revenues depend on the size of their rated audience,” said Chairman Towns. “There is a serious risk that certain groups of minority listeners will continue to be undercounted, imperiling minority audience radio stations and decreasing the diversity of opinions in radio broadcasting.”

The most critical complaints against Arbitron by sectors in the radio industry and state government include: (1) Arbitron’s failure to distribute the PPM within minority communities, resulting in the underrepresentation of these listeners in sample studies and data collection; (2) failure to use sample audience panels which reflect the demographic of the market being rated; (3) failure to recruit PPM participants from cell-phone-only households, which disproportionately affects minorities; and (4) insufficient training of non-English speaking PPM participants in the proper use of the device.

The FCC has launched its own investigation into possible methodological flaws with the PPM and has issued a public notice into the use of the PPM. In the letter to FCC Chairman Copps, Chairman Towns asks the FCC to provide the Committee with the status of its PPM investigation plus details on the Commission's plans to proceed, including a schedule for implementation.

"This is a very important issue with potentially far reaching implications for the future of radio broadcasting, including the viability of minority-serving radio stations," added Chairman Towns.

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Documents and Links

- [Letter to the Honorable Michael J. Copps](#)