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Chairman Towns Wants Arbitron to Overhaul Its Use of PPM

Towns gives Arbitron, Media Ratings Council and PPM Coalition thirty days to address PPM problems

Washington, DC –U.S. Representative Edolphus “Ed” Towns (D-NY), Chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, is taking action to ensure that Arbitron addresses problems associated with its new rating system, the Personal People Meter (PPM), amid concerns that the system undercounts minority radio listeners. In recent letters to the heads of Arbitron, Media Rating Council (MRC) and several minority broadcasting corporations, Chairman Towns requested that these organizations work collaboratively to remedy problems with Arbitron’s PPM. Noting the “hard fought battle” to establish “diversity on the airwaves,” Chairman Towns stressed that the “plan of action” include “not only viable solutions, but also a realistic timetable for addressing the issues.”

Chairman Towns set the deadline after a committee hearing on December 2, 2009 that examined Arbitron’s radio audience measurement device and its effect on diversity in radio broadcasting. During the hearing, witnesses, including the executives of minority-owned radio stations, revealed unprecedented ratings decline as a result of the PPM. The head of the Media Rating Council (MRC), the organization that monitors Arbitron, also testified at the same hearing that it had denied accreditation for Arbitron’s PPM in 31 of 33 radio markets on the grounds that Arbitron does not include enough minority listeners in its ratings samples.

Chairman Towns also sent letters to other witnesses that testified at the December 2nd hearing, including Univision Communications, Inc.; Minority Media and Telecom Council; ICBC Holdings, Inc.; Bromley Communications, Inc.; Spanish Broadcasting System; and Radio One, Inc.

Chairman Towns is calling on the organizations to work together to determine “a solution that creates accurate ratings for all radio stations, including minority targeted broadcasters.”

The chairman warned, however, that he would consider legislation to address the problem if it was not resolved within the thirty day timeframe.

The text of the letter is included below.

December 10, 2009

On December 2, 2009, the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform conducted a hearing entitled "Will Arbitron's Personal People Meter (PPM) Silence Minority-owned Radio Stations?" At the conclusion of this hearing, I gave Arbitron, the MRC, and members of the PPM coalition thirty days to develop a plan of action to address problems associated with the PPM device. I have asked that this plan of action contain not only viable solutions, but also a realistic timetable for addressing the issues raised at the hearing.

I am confident that participants at the hearing, with help from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), can develop a solution that creates accurate ratings for all radio stations, including minority targeted broadcasters. To achieve this, it is critical that all parties, including Arbitron, work together to ensure that the PPM methodology finally meets the high standards set by the Media Ratings Council (MRC). As a first step, all parties should meet as soon as possible to establish a foundation for a sustainable agreement.

It took decades of hard-fought battles to finally create diversity on the airwaves. I will not let this diversity perish overnight because of inaccurate ratings. I am personally committed to working with all parties to resolve this problem expeditiously. Committee staff will be closely following your progress over the next month.

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