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Study: New Nielsen Ratings System May Undercut Minority Viewers

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LOS ANGELES -- Nielsen Media Research Monday faulted a study critical of its yet-to-be-implemented "Local People Meter" for gauging TV audiences, and called in USC's Tomas Rivera Policy Institute to review the findings.

The National Hispanic Media Coalition's Latino Television Study found that Nielsen's LPM system could undercount minority viewers by as much as 25 percent.

"If Nielsen gets its way, minority viewership could be dramatically undercounted," said Alex Nogales, president of the National Hispanic Media Coalition.

"The civil rights of Latinos and African-Americans will be short-changed with less programming, less economic opportunities and less influence in the media marketplace."

Nielsen said it "has contracted with University of Southern California's Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, the nation's premier independent Latino policy research organization, to review" the study, which was conducted by Rincon & Associates.

"Having measured audiences for more than a half century, Nielsen is committed to accuracy in all its measurements," said Susan Whiting, president and CEO of Nielsen Media Research.

"After we reviewed the Rincon study, we had serious questions regarding its objectivity, reliability and methodology. Accordingly, we sought an independent third-party analysis from nationally known scholars to review and independently audit the NHMC study."

According to Nielsen, Rincon conducted a telephone study of Latinos living in only four cities -- Los Angeles, Miami, New York and San Antonio --

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failing to represent the entire country.

Rincon also relied solely on listed telephone numbers, excluding Latinos with unlisted or no telephones, according to Nielsen.

"It is critical to Nielsen that the quality of our ratings are beyond reproach, and we will work with Rincon or any other organization that is interested in seeking an unbiased understanding of Latino viewing behavior," Whiting said.

Some policy-makers have cited the Rincon study as a reason for delaying the launch of Nielsen's Local People Meters in New York City and other major markets.

The Don't Count Us Out Coalition, made up of entertainment industry representatives, elected officials and community leaders, is trying to stall implementation of the people meters in Los Angeles.

The system replaces the company's traditional ratings diaries, in which families write down what they watch, with an electronic device that tracks what people are watching.

"Whether it's the people meters, or whether it's the diaries, at heart is that their methodology is wrong," Nogales said.

Los Angeles City Councilman Bernard Parks compared the system to the census count.

"It dictates what programming goes on the air.

It dictates who gets jobs in front of and behind the camera. It dictates what our community will see," he said.

Rep. Hilda Solis, D-El Monte, said she will request a congressional hearing on the issue.

"We know we're headed for a train wreck if we continue this movement here in Los Angeles," she said.

Dennis Leoni was the producer, writer and director of "Resurrection Blvd.," a TV drama about a Mexican-American family of boxers in East Los Angeles, before it was canceled due to low ratings.

"When a show like 'Resurrection Blvd.' goes off the air ... not only are hundreds of Latinos affected by the fact that they no longer have jobs in an industry in which their numbers are already abysmally low, but 35 million Latinos are impacted by the fact that our positive images disappear," he said.

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