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**TELEVISION: News**

May 11, 2004

**People Meter pulls in protesters**

By Cynthia Littleton  
 The battle over the launch of Nielsen Media Research's local People Meter service came to Los Angeles on Monday as activists held a news conference on the steps of City Hall to criticize Nielsen for what its detractors view as a systemic problem of undercounting minority television viewership.

"If Nielsen gets its way, minority viewership could be dramatically undercounted, and the civil rights of Latinos and African Americans will be shortchanged with less programming, less economic opportunities and less influence in the media marketplace," said Alex Nogales, president of the National Hispanic Media Coalition. "This is an issue of civil rights for the entire entertainment industry."



Joining Nogales at the morning news conference organized by the Don't Count Us Out coalition of advocacy groups and lawmakers were Rep. Hilda Solis, D-Los Angeles, Los Angeles City Council members Bernard Parks and Jan Perry and producers Moctesuma Esparza ("Selena"), Josefina Lopez ("Real Women Have Curves") and Dennis Leoni (Showtime's "Resurrection Blvd.").

The crux of the dispute centers on Nielsen's plan to launch its electronic ratings-gathering People Meter

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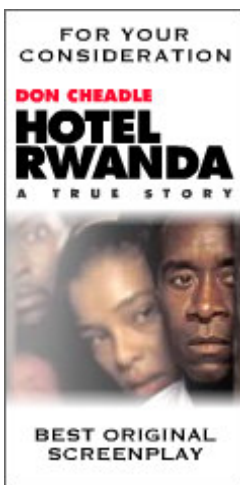
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service in key major markets this year. (Nielsen Media Research is owned by VNU, parent company of The Hollywood Reporter.) The People Meter service is an electronic means of gathering detailed demographic data on the audience for television programs on a nightly basis.

People Meters have been used on a national basis to measure primetime viewing since 1987. But Nielsen's 210 local TV markets still use the decades-old system of having Nielsen family members record their specific viewing choices in written diaries during sweep months -- primarily February, May and November -- to provide demographic data on a local market basis.

Nielsen's critics contend that the company's methodology for assembling the local People Meter sample is flawed because it fails to account for a range of subtle nuances in the ethnicity, income level, language proficiency and other characteristics of minority populations, particularly in sprawling urban areas such as New York and Los Angeles. Nielsen maintains that the electronic People Meter collection process will provide a more accurate picture than the diary system, which often depend on the respondents' memory rather than an on-the-spot of chronicle of what programs are viewed.

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Protests by the Don't Count Us Out coalition in March forced Nielsen to delay its planned rollout of local People Meters in New York from the scheduled date of April 8 to early June (HR 4/1).

Coalition activists say that Nielsen's tests of the local People Meter system in New York show wide variances between the ratings for shows popular with minority viewers in comparison to ratings data for the same programs collected under the diary method. Critics contend that if the launch of local People Meters results in a sharp drop in ratings for programs favored by black and Hispanic viewers, TV networks and advertisers will have less incentive to support such shows, among other ramifications.

Nielsen executives, on the other hand, maintain that the coalition's protests have been stirred up to a significant degree by Fox's dissatisfaction with the results of the early local People Meter results in New York. Those tests saw ratings for some shows on Fox-owned stations, which tend to have a larger base of minority viewers than ABC, CBS and NBC affiliates, post sharp declines. Nielsen brass have maintained that as the local ratings picture becomes more accurate, many established stations and programs are likely to see ratings declines, while other cable/satellite channels will register gains.

Nielsen spokesman Jack Loftus said Monday that the company intends to proceed with the planned early July launch of People Meters in Los Angeles, where the rollout was previously delayed from March because of Nielsen's own concerns with the quality of its sample (HR 3/23). Nielsen also will proceed with June 3 as the rescheduled launch date for People Meters in New York.

The coalition has called on Nielsen to open up its

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methodological processes for assembling the local People Meter sample (comprising about 800 homes in Los Angeles, up from about 500 under the diary system) for review by an outside research firm. Nielsen has said that it submits all of its ratings-gathering procedures for scrutiny every year by the New York-based Media Ratings Council, an industry group composed of major broadcasters, cablers and advertising agencies. Nogales and Fox officials countered that the MRC is hardly an unbiased source.

Loftus also said that the headline-generating controversy over Nielsen's minority ratings measurement already has had a detrimental effect on Nielsen's effort to randomly recruit minority homes to become respondents. Loftus said that the company's recruiters have been turned away at the door by prospective contributors who told recruiters they "didn't want to get involved" in any controversy.

Nogales and other coalition members point to a study released this year by Dallas-based research firm Rincon & Associates that found major discrepancies in Nielsen's local People Meter test data from New York, among other flaws in Nielsen's process for assembling a sample that accurately reflected the characteristics of the nation's fast-growing Hispanic population. The Rincon study, commissioned by the National Hispanic Media Coalition and funded by ABC and CBS, found that Nielsen put too much emphasis on recruiting Hispanic Nielsen family members in lower-income neighborhoods.

Because Hispanics with higher incomes tend to be primarily English-speaking and U.S.-born, the emphasis on recruiting in lower-income areas tends to skew Hispanic ratings toward Spanish-language networks at the expense of English-language programs, Rincon president Dr. Edward Rincon said.

Nielsen countered Monday by announcing that it has hired the USC-based Tomas Rivera Policy Institute to review the results of the Rincon study.



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