L2 Media Market Areas (MMAs)

An Independent Approach to Defining U.S. Media Markets

Introduction

Advertising markets have traditionally been organized around geographic areas that represent communities sharing common television stations, economic relationships and population centers. These market definitions are useful because advertisers rarely want to evaluate every county, city or ZIP Code separately. Instead, they need practical geographic markets within which audiences can be measured, compared and targeted.

L2 developed **Media Market Areas (MMAs)** to provide an independent, transparent and data-driven way of organizing the United States into media markets. The objective is not to reproduce any existing proprietary market geography. Rather, the L2 methodology begins with publicly available geographic, broadcast and economic information and determines which counties most naturally belong together.

Every U.S. county or county-equivalent is assigned to one L2 Media Market Area. Because L2's voter and consumer data can then be summarized within these boundaries, an MMA can be profiled using hundreds of demographic, political, socioeconomic and consumer characteristics.

How the Markets Are Created

The process begins by identifying the principal **media centers** around which markets naturally form. Major cities with concentrations of full-power television stations generally emerge as the centers of these markets.

L2 then evaluates each county against the media centers that could reasonably serve it. Rather than relying on a single factor, the methodology considers five different relationships: **broadcast coverage, commuting patterns, metropolitan relationships, geographic distance and geographic continuity.**

The factors are combined into a single score:

50% Broadcast Affinity + 20% Commuting Affinity + 12% Metropolitan Affinity + 10% Distance + 8% Geographic Continuity

Broadcast affinity receives the greatest weight because MMAs are fundamentally intended to describe media markets. The remaining factors help distinguish between competing markets, particularly in counties located near market boundaries.

1. Broadcast Affinity — 50%

Television broadcasting provides the foundation of the model.

L2 uses publicly available information from the **Federal Communications Commission (FCC)** concerning full-power and Class A television stations, including station locations and predicted coverage. FCC data provide information on television facilities and modeled coverage and populations served.

The methodology evaluates the extent to which the population of a county falls within the service areas of television stations associated with each potential media center. A county strongly covered by several stations from one city will therefore have a substantially greater broadcast relationship with that city than with a market whose stations reach only a small portion of the county.

This approach is particularly valuable near market boundaries because county lines and television signals do not necessarily coincide. A county may be geographically closer to one city while receiving substantially stronger television service from another.

2. Commuting Affinity — 20%

Media markets are also communities of economic activity.

For this reason, L2 incorporates county-to-county commuting information from the **U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey**. Census commuting-flow data identify where workers live and where they work, allowing economic relationships between counties and metropolitan centers to be measured.

If a substantial share of the residents of a county commute into the counties surrounding a particular media center, that provides evidence that the county is socially and economically connected to that market.

Commuting information is especially useful in suburban and exurban areas, where television coverage from two neighboring markets may overlap.

3. Metropolitan Affinity — 12%

L2 also considers the federal government's official definitions of metropolitan relationships.

The **U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB)** defines Core Based Statistical Areas, including Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas, while the Census Bureau publishes their component counties. Related metropolitan areas can also be grouped into Combined Statistical Areas when significant economic and commuting relationships exist between them.

L2 uses the July 2023 OMB/Census delineations as an independent indication of whether a county belongs to the same metropolitan community as a potential media-market center.

A county in the same metropolitan area as a market center receives a strong metropolitan-affinity score. Membership in the same broader Combined Statistical Area provides additional, although weaker, evidence of a relationship.

4. Geographic Distance — 10%

Distance remains relevant, but it is deliberately prevented from dominating the model.

L2 measures the distance between each county's population center and the center of each potential media market. Nearby markets receive higher scores, with the score gradually declining as distance increases.

This component helps resolve situations in which the other evidence is relatively balanced. It also prevents unlikely assignments in which a county would be attached to a distant market despite having otherwise comparable alternatives nearby.

Importantly, distance accounts for only 10 percent of the overall score. A county is therefore not assigned to a market simply because that market happens to be geographically closest.

5. Geographic Continuity — 8%

Useful media markets should ordinarily form coherent geographic areas rather than collections of disconnected counties.

After the initial assignments are calculated, L2 examines the counties surrounding each county. A county receives additional support for a market when neighboring counties are also associated with that market.

The model then recalculates the assignments iteratively. This process encourages contiguous market boundaries while still allowing stronger broadcast, commuting or metropolitan evidence to override simple geographic neatness.

Special geographic circumstances—including islands, mountainous regions and Alaska—can be handled separately when ordinary county adjacency does not accurately describe the real-world relationship.

Testing the Boundaries

An important feature of the L2 methodology is that the computer does not simply produce a map and declare every boundary equally certain.

For every county, L2 retains the scores of competing markets. The difference between the highest-scoring market and the next-best alternative provides one measure of confidence.

L2 also tests **robustness** by recalculating the entire country repeatedly while making modest changes to the weights assigned to the five factors. A county that remains in the same market through nearly every simulation has a highly stable assignment. A county that repeatedly moves between two markets is inherently more ambiguous.

Those ambiguous counties are identified for human review.

During that review, analysts examine the underlying broadcast coverage, commuting flows, metropolitan relationships and surrounding geography. Manual changes are documented rather than silently inserted into the database. This provides both quality control and an audit trail explaining why an unusual boundary decision was made.

An Independent Geography

A fundamental principle of the project is **independent creation**.

The L2 methodology does not require proprietary county-to-market assignments from an existing commercial media-market system. Its principal geographic and analytical inputs come instead from public sources, including the **Federal Communications Commission, U.S. Census Bureau and Office of Management and Budget**.

This distinction is important. The objective is not to determine how another organization classifies a county and then recreate that result. The objective is to ask a more fundamental question:

Based on television coverage, economic relationships, metropolitan organization and geography, which media center is this county actually most closely associated with?

The answer to that question determines the L2 Media Market Area.

From Geography to Audience Intelligence

Creating the boundaries is only the first step.

Once each county has been assigned to an MMA, L2 can aggregate its national voter, consumer and demographic information within those markets. An advertiser can therefore examine not simply how many people live in a market, but the characteristics of the audiences found there.

For example, markets can be compared by age, household income, homeownership, education, family composition, voter registration, political characteristics, consumer attributes and numerous other variables available within L2 data.

The same system can also calculate an **audience concentration index**. If a particular type of consumer represents 18 percent of one MMA but only 12 percent of the national population, that market has a concentration index of 150 for that audience.

This allows advertisers to move beyond asking:

“Which media markets are largest?”

L2 BETTER DATA BETTER DECISIONS

and instead ask:

“Which media markets contain the greatest concentrations of the people we actually want to reach?”

Conclusion

L2 Media Market Areas are designed to provide a transparent and independently constructed framework for understanding America’s local media geography.

By combining broadcast coverage with actual economic relationships, federal metropolitan definitions, distance and geographic continuity, the methodology recognizes that a media market is more than a collection of nearby counties. It is a community connected by the media people receive, the places they work and the metropolitan centers around which their daily lives are organized.

The result is a national geography designed not merely to divide the country into markets, but to connect those markets directly to L2’s audience intelligence—allowing advertisers to understand **where their audiences are concentrated and how best to reach them.**