

**Minimum
Standards
For
Media
Rating Research:**

**Modified for
Application to
Media Monitoring Services**

Media Rating Council, Inc.

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Introduction

The Media Rating Council, Inc. (MRC) believes that adherence to the following minimum standards is necessary to meet the basic objectives of valid, reliable and effective media research. Acceptance of MRC minimum standards by a media research service is one of the conditions of accreditation by the MRC, Inc. These are intended to be minimum standards and neither they, nor anything in MRC Procedures, shall prevent any media research service from following higher standards in its operations.

This special version of the MRC Minimum Standards is an adaptation of the full Standards for use by, and application to, media monitoring services—media research services that track advertising and programming placement by media. Such services generally do not involve surveys of consumers, and these modified Standards reflect only the principles that are considered applicable to media monitoring. We have retained the basic lettering and numbering scheme of the primary Standards document for consistency’s sake; however, the wording may have been modified to ensure applicability to media monitoring research.

The minimum standards listed herein are divided into three groups:

A. Ethical and Operational Standards

These standards govern the quality and integrity of the entire process by which the research service is produced.

B. Disclosure Standards

These standards specify the detailed information about a research service, which must be made available to users, to the MRC, Inc., and its audit agent, as well as the form in which the information should be made available.

C. Electronic Delivery and Third-Party Processor Supplementary Standards

These standards reflect additional requirements for research services that deliver data electronically and for third-party processors that apply for accreditation.

A. Ethical and Operational Standards

1. Each media monitoring service shall try constantly to reduce the effects of bias, distortion and human error in all phases of its activities.
2. Appropriate quality control procedures shall be maintained with respect to all external and internal operations which may reasonably be assumed to exert significant effects on the final results.

Quality control shall be applied to, but not necessarily limited to, sampling of media to be monitored, sample implementation, data collection, data editing, data input, tabulation and data delivery in printed and electronic formats. It shall include (where relevant) periodic independent internal verification of fieldwork and periodic accuracy checks of equipment performance and computer accumulations of base data.

3. The design for a media monitoring service must, to a reasonable degree, accurately reflect the statistical universe targeted for measurement. In each report, the statistical universe to which measurements are projected must be clearly defined. In instances where the design may exclude part of the defined universe, such deviations shall be described clearly.
4. All operational personnel (including supervisors) shall be furnished with detailed written instructions and manuals covering all steps of their work. Such personnel shall be thoroughly trained to assure that:
 - a. They know the responsibilities of their positions.
 - b. They understand all instructions governing their work.
 - c. They will deviate from such instructions only when justified by unusual conditions and that any such deviations will be reported in writing.
 - d. They recognize and will avoid any act which might tend to misrepresent or bias the information collected.
5. To improve quality of performance, all personnel shall be informed that their work will be periodically checked by internal quality control procedures and by MRC auditors. Every effort shall be made to avoid divulgence to such persons of the checking procedures and the personnel, times and places selected for checking.
6. Detailed written instructions shall be maintained to insure uniform procedures in editing operations. Any editing changes to the raw data (additions, deletions or changes) shall be made in an easily identifiable manner so that such editing changes can be checked or audited. Any routines for editing by computer shall be clearly documented.

7. Each media monitoring service utilizing computer systems for processing monitoring data shall establish procedures to insure that:
 - a. The operations to be performed by the computer system are documented in sufficient detail to specify for each computer program at least: the objective of the program; the input data to be used; the editing and processing steps to be performed, and the output data.
 - b. The computer programs and data are diligently protected from unauthorized manipulation.
 - c. Changes in any computer program are documented in enough detail to identify what is being changed, the reason for the changes, tests performed to confirm the effect(s) of the changes, and the effective date of the changes.
8. The anonymity of all personnel in any way concerned with the collection and processing of data shall be preserved.
9. [Not Applicable.]
10. Experiments in methodology shall not be conducted in conjunction with regular syndicated research unless previous independent tests have indicated that the possible effect on the data reported will be minimal and unless full disclosure is made as provided in B2 below.
11. [Not Applicable.]
12. In the event that a media monitoring service has identified an attempt to bias measurement results by a submission of fabricated information, it will do whatever may be necessary to identify and eliminate such cases. In the event that such cases have been included in published data, the service will attempt to assess the effect on results and will notify users should this prove to be of practical significance.
13. All weighting or data adjustment procedures utilized by a media monitoring service in the process of converting basic raw data to research reports shall be based on systematic, logical procedures, consistently applied by the service and defensible by empirical analysis.

B. Disclosure Standards

General

A concise description of the research methodology shall be included in each report. This description shall include, but is not to be limited to, a description of the measurement technique used, a delineation of the area or areas for which estimates were reported, the sampling procedures used, periods during which the data were obtained, criteria for reporting thresholds, a statement as to whether weighting and/or adjustment factors have been used, and a statement as to whether atypical techniques have been used.

Specific

1. Each report shall include statements calling attention to all omissions, errors and biases known to the media monitoring service which may exert a significant effect on the findings shown in the report.
2. Each monitoring report shall point out changes in, or deviations from, the standard operating procedures of the media monitoring service which may exert a significant effect on the reported results. This notification shall indicate the estimated magnitude of the effect. The notice shall go to subscribers in advance as well as being prominently displayed in the report itself.
3. Each monitoring report shall show the number of universe entities initially selected and designated to provide data and the number among these that provided usable data utilized for that specific report. If any of the usable data sets have not been included in the final monitoring report, that fact and a description of the procedure by which such data were selected shall be included in the report.
4. Each monitoring report shall indicate the number of tabulated entities for the reporting of any separate data (e.g., geographic breakdowns such as Metro and Total Area). This information is to be provided on a basis of in-tab and, where appropriate, effective sample sizes.
5. Geographic areas surveyed shall be clearly defined in each monitoring report and the criteria and/or source used in the selection of the measured areas shall be given. (Thus, if the area measured is the Metro area as defined by the U.S. Census, the report should so state.)
6. [Not Applicable.]

7. Each monitoring report shall state that the data obtained may be subject to both sampling and non-sampling errors and shall point out the major non-sampling errors which are believed to affect the estimates.
8. With respect to sampling error, if the media monitoring service samples only some data entities (e.g., time periods or media outlets) but projects the results to a larger total:
 - a. Each monitoring report shall contain standard error data relevant to the estimates contained therein. Such data shall be presented whether or not effective sample sizes are shown.
 - b. The report shall also contain a non-technical explanation of the meaning and use of standard error as well as a clear guide to how the data may be applied to any given estimate contained in the report.
 - c. The method used to develop standard error estimates as well as the formulas used to compute the standard errors shall be fully disclosed. The service shall provide a basis for calculating sample errors for other estimates commonly calculated from data published in its reports, although this material may be included in a methodological supplement rather than the report itself.
 - d. In order for the MRC to verify the accuracy of the standard error and effective sample size approximations contained in a research report, research services will be requested periodically to provide a sample of standard errors and effective sample sizes calculated by appropriate standard error formulas. The MRC may use this information as a comparison with results obtained by applying the approximation formulas given in reports.
9. All weighting or data adjustment procedures utilized by a media monitoring service in the process of converting basic raw data to monitoring reports shall be clearly stated and quantified. This detailed information should be available in each monitoring report or reporting system. Appropriate reference material shall also describe procedures and the reasons for such adjustments or weighting.
10. If a media monitoring service establishes minimum requirements for the issuance of a monitoring report or for reporting monitored entities, the service shall indicate the minimum number of tabulated units required for each category.
11. If the media monitoring service becomes aware of any special non-regular techniques (e.g., promotions) that may distort or “hype” the published data, the monitoring service shall publish a description of this effort in the appropriate report.
12. If a media monitoring service has knowledge of apparent distorting influences such as community power outages, catastrophes or transmission failures, the service shall indicate in its reports that such conditions existed during the measured period.

13. With respect to accreditable but presently non-accredited products offered by a media monitoring service which produces a media monitoring report(s) accredited by MRC:
 - a. Efforts must be taken by the company to disclose fully that these other products are, in fact, not accredited by the Council. To avoid subscriber confusion, the minimum requirement is: (1) the report covers for non-accredited products be distinctively different from those used on accredited service(s), and (2) each non-accredited product must carry prominently (on the outside front cover, inside front cover or the opposite page) the following statement:
 - (a) "This product is not part of a regular syndicated research service accredited by the MRC and _____ has not requested accreditation. _____ does provide one or more syndicated services which are accredited by the MRC."
 - b. Tabulations and reports executed by a media monitoring service for a specific client or clients shall clearly show that the report is of a special nature and not part of a regular accredited syndicated media monitoring service. Such report shall show the name of the client or clients and shall be (1)easily distinguishable from accredited reports by use of distinctive report covers, and (2) notice to this effect must be on the outside front cover, inside front cover or the opposite page.
 - c. The MRC accreditation symbol will not be used on any reports which are not an integral part of a service accredited by and subject to audit by the MRC.
14. The media monitoring service shall permit such CPA firm(s) designated by the MRC for the purpose of auditing to review and/or audit any or all procedures or operations that bear upon the development and reporting of published or distributed estimates.
15. Although the anonymity of all personnel concerned with collecting or processing raw data shall be preserved (as required by A-8), the MRC audit firm will have the right to check with such personnel and any other appropriate persons as part of the auditing process. (The audit firm will in its audit reports maintain the anonymity of such personnel.)
16. Records associated with data collection staff (including supervisors) shall be maintained at least eleven months by the media monitoring service to show: name; date of work; time; type of work; location of work; manner of payment (e.g., full-time staff, part-time staff, hourly, conditions [if any] under which bonuses are paid, etc.).

17. Each media monitoring service shall maintain, for at least eleven months from the end of the period covered by the report, all records of raw data (or a complete facsimile thereof), tape records and/or other primary sources of monitoring data. These shall include material actually used in the preparation of published reports as well as material collected but not used. In addition, each service shall maintain records of:
 - a. All attempts to collect data through whatever form of cooperation is required for the research technique used.
 - b. All unsuccessful attempts to obtain information, including- but not limited to - refusals, cases requiring further discussion and/or correspondence, busy signals (phone), and technical failures.
 - c. Actual or assumed reasons for non-cooperation or data incompleteness.
 - d. [Not Applicable.]
18. Collected data that is not put into tabulation for any reason (incomplete, late, poor quality, wrong area, etc.) shall be marked to indicate the reason for rejection and filed as provided under B-17.
19. Each media monitoring service shall keep documentation of errors of any type in published figures for a period of two years.

Included in such documentation shall be: the length of time the error affected published figures; the effect of the error in absolute and relative terms; its cause; the corrective action taken; and the disclosures, if any, made to subscribers (copies of notices, etc.). If no disclosure was made, the record should indicate the reason underlying this decision.
20. Data edit procedures and manuals will be made available to subscribers at service headquarters where raw data is made available for inspection.

C. Electronic Delivery and Third Party Processor Supplementary Standards

General

In addition to groups A and B above, research services that deliver audience data electronically and third party processors of accredited research service data are required to adhere to the following minimum standards. In these cases, many of the disclosures required by the minimum standards can be made within the electronic delivery system.

In this context a "System" refers to the electronic delivery system or the software used by a third party processor to manipulate an accredited service's data. A "Third Party Processor" is an organization that reprocesses monitoring data from a primary supplier to provide alternative report formats, applications, etc.

Specific

1. The System must have reasonable controls to prevent:
 - a. [Not Applicable.]
 - b. Users from altering raw data. Raw data also includes weighting and sample balancing results.
 - c. Users from altering System software.
 - d. Report headings selected by users from being misleading. This includes the use of footnotes and "flags" where necessary to clarify limitations of the data presented.
2. Users of the System should be alerted, and reports from the System must delineate:
 - a. Monitoring estimates produced by the System having suspect reliability, such as in cases of less than minimum reportability. Minimum requirements for reporting and reliability can change due to the customizable nature of System analyses; in these instances the System shall indicate the minimum number of data entities required for each analyses.
 - b. Estimates originating from statistical models rather than directly from collected data with documentation made available to auditors on request.
 - c. Data from non-accredited sources. System reports should clearly disclose these situations using language similar to that in B-13 above.
 - d. Situations of data reissuance due to errors.

3. The media monitoring service or third party processors must have reasonable controls to ensure:
 - a. Users have received the current version of the System.
 - b. Users are notified timely of errors noted in the System and/or data, and where necessary, that corrected software and/or data are distributed timely.
4. Exportation of data from the System generally takes manipulation of the data outside of the control of the monitoring service or third party processor, therefore this activity will not be accredited. Reasonable efforts must be made to identify and distinguish standard reports of the System from reports based on exported data.
5. The media monitoring service or third party processor is encouraged to supply detailed written instructions, user manuals or on-line help facilities to assist users in properly executing System functions.

Additional Recommended Standards

[First Paragraph Not Applicable.]

For MRC Minimum Standards for A10 and B2

In an effort to assist research companies in their adherence to MRC Minimum Standards A10 and B2, the MRC suggests the following:

- I. Each research company is encouraged to provide the MRC a “Journal of Changes” on a quarterly basis. This Journal would include any and all changes in methodology and procedures that the research company is planning to test and/or implement in the next quarter or, if known, beyond. Submission itself does not imply any waiver of A10/B2.

and/or

- II. Each research company is encouraged to avail themselves of the following voluntary “Live Test Procedures”:

Live Test Procedures

1. Before implementing a Live Test of any of the methods and procedures used to collect data, the research company agrees to review such proposed tests with the MRC Staff and two Ad-Hoc MRC Board members (Hereafter referred to as the MRC Group), detailing the objectives of the test and the contemplated procedures. Results of prior tests supporting minimal effects, if available, should also be offered.
2. If the evidence suggests to the MRC Group that the possible effect on reported data will be minimal, then the research company will be advised that implementation of the test will not be considered a violation of Minimum Standard A10.
3. Should the MRC Group or the research company feel the need for outside technical counsel, this would first be jointly discussed and outside technical counsel will be jointly agreed on.
4. Should the research company request it, the MRC Group would agree not to reveal the specific nature of these tests other than to the independent auditor working with the research company on behalf of the MRC and, if required, outside technical counsel.
5. The research company would disclose to all subscribers that a test was conducted and reach agreement with the MRC Staff and the MRC Group as to the statement(s) to be made. Disclosure, per Minimum Standard B2, will go to subscribers in advance as well as being prominently displayed in the report itself should the staff and group feel required.
6. It is also understood that, ultimately, the decision to conduct a live test rests with the research company. The procedure described above is intended to assist the research company in working within the framework of MRC Standards A10 and B2.

MRC Executive Directors

Dr. Kenneth Baker	(1964 – 1970)
Hugh “Mal” Beville, Jr.	(1971 – 1981)
John Dimling	(1982 – 1985)
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