# Reach does not equal readership.

ANALYSIS CONDUCTED BY JIM PIERPOINT

## Fast Facts

▶ Jim Pierpoint is lecturer at NC State University, a communications executive, media researcher, and former wire correspondent.

▶ His research focuses on elevating business communication tactics and strategies.

▶ Pierpoint's "Proof of Concept: Reach does not equal readership" measures the error rates of traditional PR measurement methodologies.

▶ Correlation scores compare potential reach to actual article readership.

## BACKGROUND

## The foundation of PR measurement is antiquated.

Two professors from UNC Chapel Hill conducted a study during the 1968 presidential election to understand how mass media sets the public agenda. They surveyed a sample of 100 Chapel Hill voters and found a near-perfect correlation between what they thought to be the most important issues during the campaign and the issues covered by the press.

This study, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media" (published 1972), birthed the foundation of PR measurement: the media sets the agenda for the public, so news volume is a measure of public opinion.

Over time, other dimensions were added to content analysis–e.g. tonality, potential reach based on a publication's monthly unique visitors, social engagement with an article, etc. But at its core, a 1968 study of 100 people without any causality told the industry that volume was a sufficient proxy for measuring reach.
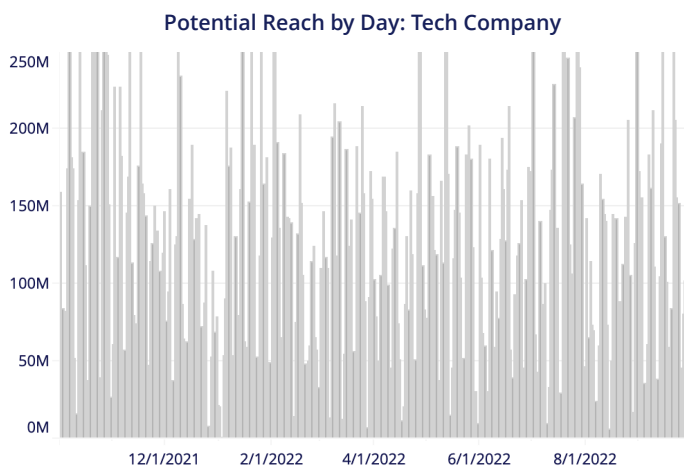
" *Do we really think every U.S. adult sees news about every major company and brand dozens of times a year? Unlikely.*

– Jim Pierpoint in "Turn Down the Volume"

## REACH ANALYSIS

## Potential reach explodes beyond reality.



Potential Reach by Day: Tech Company

Pierpoint pulled news coverage of six companies over a 12-month period, as reported by traditional media monitoring software. To focus on company news, only articles with company names in headlines are analyzed.

In a visualization of published news about a large technology company (left), each get column represents a the day's imputed reach (estimated reach based on publishers' monthly site traffic). "Reach" exceeded 250 million potential readers on 33 different days over the year. Put another away, reach exceeded the adult population of the U.S. on 33 different days. On the biggest news day, imputed reach exceeded 600 million.

# Potential reach and actual readership are not strongly correlated.

In 6 regression analyses, Pierpoint compared potential reach of published news about companies and actual article readership (unique visitors to individual articles).

A score of 1.0 would indicate perfect correlation. That is, the directionality of potential reach and article readership could be perfectly predicted: if potential reach increases by X%, article readership would always increase by Y%. A correlation coefficient of 0 would indicate no co-movement whatsoever; the relationship between the two would be completely random.

The correlations (r) between imputed reach and actual readership for the six companies Pierpoint analyzed were 0.40, 0.42, 0.47, 0.51, 0.63, and 0.68 – the highest one still not clearing the 0.70 mark Pierpoint considers sufficiently "strong" for business use.

> " *[We] validated a working assumption that news that is published and news that people read are two separate and distinct variables in the media equation.*
>
> – Jim Pierpoint in <u>Reach does not equal Readership</u>

**Potential Reach vs. Readership by Day**



Technology Co.
Corr. coeff. = 0.42
Error = 80%

Grocery Chain
Corr. coeff. = 0.40
Error = 90%

Healthcare Co.
Corr. coeff. = 0.63
Error = 40%

# In stress tests, potential reach fails to identify the biggest news days.

To further test what correlations ranging from 0.40-0.68 mean for using potential reach as a proxy for actual readership, Pierpoint ran "Top 10" tests. He compared the 10 top news days based on potential reach against the 10 top news days based on actual readership.

Only 2 days overlapped (80% error rate) for the technology company mentioned on the previous page, and error rates ranged from 20% to 90%.

In sum, the correlation between potential reach and actual readership is not strong and highly inconsistent.
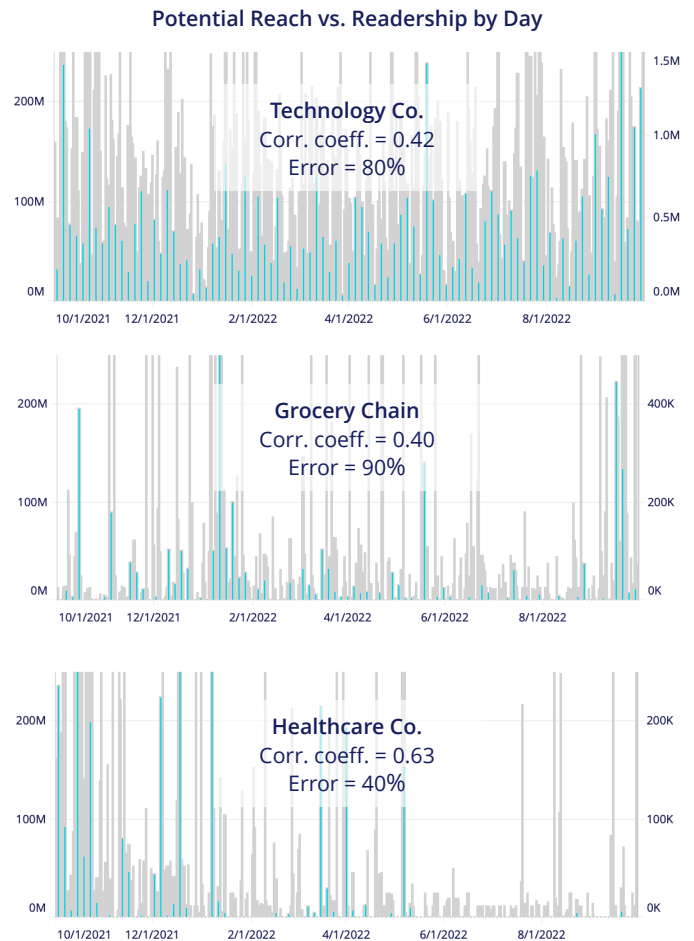
## Takeaways

▶ Measuring PR impact through potential reach is statistically flawed and an unreliable business metric.

▶ Competitive volume comparisons do not give an accurate depiction of the competitive landscape.

▶ To generate actionable insights, we need to measure both news that was published and news people actually read.