



Navigating the AI Frontier in Health Communication Research: Exclusive Interview with Prof. Xiaoquan Zhao, Editor-in-Chief of *Health Communication*

Journal of Medicine, Humanity and Media
2025, Vol. 3(3)
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ISSN: 2817-5166
mhmjournal.net

Yueliang Jiang 

Institute for Interdisciplinary Information Sciences, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

Siyu Pu 

School of Journalism and Information Communication, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, China

Haoyi Liu 

College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Abstract

As AI reshapes health communication—from digital likeness impersonating real humans to algorithms predicting epidemics—how can health communication researchers continue to promote and safeguard health as a quintessential human value? On July 6th, 2025, during the MHM2025 conference, we interviewed Prof. Xiaoquan Zhao, Editor-in-Chief of *Health Communication*. Drawing on more than 20 years of experience as a health communication scholar, Prof. Zhao offers an answer: We should strive to be rational brokers of knowledge amid the technological frenzy and keep humanity at the heart of innovation. In this exclusive interview, he reflects on the evolving role of health communication in the AI age and how academic research can adapt in a rapidly changing world.

Corresponding author:

Yueliang Jiang, Institute for Interdisciplinary Information Sciences, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China. Email: jiangyueliang_thu@163.com

Keywords

Health communication, Artificial intelligence, Journal management

Introduction

On July 6th, 2025, during the MHM2025 conference, we interviewed Prof. Xiaoquan Zhao, Editor-in-Chief of Health Communication. The exclusive interview follows below.

As AI reshapes health communication—from digital likeness impersonating real humans to algorithms predicting epidemics—how can health communication researchers continue to promote and safeguard health as a quintessential human value? In this exclusive interview, Prof. Xiaoquan Zhao, editor-in-chief of Health Communication, drawing on more than 20 years of experience as a health communication scholar, offers an answer: We should strive to be rational brokers of knowledge amid the technological frenzy and keep humanity at the heart of innovation. In this exclusive interview (conducted in Chinese and translated into English), he reflects on the evolving role of health communication in the AI age and how academic research can adapt in a rapidly changing world.

From Peking University to Leading a Top International Journal

Prof. Xiaoquan Zhao's academic path began in the English Department at Peking University, where his grounding in linguistics laid the foundation for a career that would span disciplines and borders. Reflecting on his transition from linguistics to communication studies, he gently clasped his hands and explained, "Communication, to me, felt like a natural bridge that extended the analytical rigor of linguistics while opening doors to broader societal dynamics." This boundary-crossing mindset shaped his early research, including a sociolinguistic analysis of conversational interruptions in American primetime TV.

Yet, what truly anchors Prof. Zhao's commitment to health communication are small, deeply "human" moments. He recalled, "During grad school, a class assignment required cold-calling randomly generated numbers for a survey. One call connected me to an elderly woman who was so thrilled to have someone to talk to that she kept me on the line for over half an hour—nearly making me fail the assignment. That encounter stayed with me. Her loneliness, like the struggles of all other marginalized and disenfranchised groups, is exactly what health communication scholars should care about and address in their work."

Prof. Zhao's dedication to real-world impact deepened during his decade of work at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, where he helped shape national tobacco education campaigns. Infusing insights from social cognitive theories into public health messaging, his work has contributed to measurable reductions in youth smoking. "Health is timeless and universal," he

reflected. “Its significance is self-evident.” Leaning forward suddenly, he added, “Health communication, at its core, is an applied science—grounded in theory, but driven by and serving practice.”

Health Communication in the Age of AI

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence is reshaping the landscape of health communication research. When asked how scholars can achieve breakthroughs amid this transformation, Prof. Zhao remarked, “Every era has its continuity and disruptions. We must continue to explore foundational communication themes—like behavior change and persuasion—while embracing AI’s potential to reveal new, data-driven insights.” He speculates that machine learning, large language models, and other AI technologies might introduce a highly productive era for communication research in the next five to ten years, possibly ushering in a paradigm shift in communication theory.

When discussing how Chinese health communication researchers can carve out a distinctive path and lead the field, Prof. Zhao emphasized the uniqueness of Chinese culture—its “human touch” (*renqingwei*)—a nonlinear cultural characteristic that contrasts sharply with the linear research paradigms dominant in the West. “Health communication is inherently people-centered,” he said. “Our research must reflect this humanistic concern. If one day China develops its own theories and frameworks in health communication, I hope to see this cultural essence—‘*renqingwei*’—fully embodied in them.” His insights resonate strongly with the theme of the 2025 MHM Conference: “Medicine, Humanity, and Media.”

The growing impact of large AI models has raised concerns among health communication researchers about rising technical barriers and research costs. Prof. Zhao acknowledged these challenges but pointed to emerging solutions. “While technological advancements do raise the bar for research, there are ways forward. We can reduce costs by developing smaller, localized large language models. At the same time, interdisciplinary collaboration is no longer optional—no single researcher or discipline can master all the knowledge required for intelligent media research. Collaborative innovation will be the best way to address these resource challenges.”

When asked what qualities distinguish top scholars in the field, Prof. Zhao smiled at the eager faces of young researchers before him. “The leading health communication scholars I know share a few key traits. First, an insatiable curiosity—the desire to understand new phenomena, deeply analyze them, and derive meaningful insights. Second, theoretical agility—the ability to master diverse theoretical frameworks while remaining unconstrained by them, borrowing useful elements from different theories and integrating them in an innovative fashion. And third, pure passion. Those who consistently produce groundbreaking work are driven by a genuine love for science and knowledge. Ultimately, it’s this passion that sustains you through challenges and leads to true excellence. Of course, everyone has their unique strengths, but these three traits are what I’ve often observed in the most innovative, productive, and impactful scholars.”

Safeguarding Academic Integrity in the AI Revolution

When Prof. Zhao was invited in 2024 to succeed Dr. Teresa Thompson—Health Communication's founding editor after a 37-year tenure—he took time to consider this “profound responsibility.” “It would be an immense commitment. Ultimately, I accepted the role because this journal holds special significance for me. Like many scholars, some of my earliest work appeared here—it witnessed and supported my academic growth. Someone must carry on Teri’s legacy, and it's a privilege for me to serve our scholarly community,” he said.

Under Prof. Zhao's leadership, the editorial team embraces a dual mission: “A journal should be more than a publication platform—it must nurture emerging scholars.” He elaborated, “We uphold two core principles: uncompromising academic rigor and proactive support for early-career researchers. Many have shared that their first published papers appeared in our journal—this tradition of fostering young talent must continue.”

Commenting on Chinese scholars' international submissions, Prof. Zhao noted significant improvements in quality in recent years but also observed some recurring issues: “While methodological sophistication, such as in machine learning or structural equation modeling, is impressive, some authors overlook the basics of scientific research. As a result, their papers might suffer from weak hypothesis derivation, vague definition of core concepts, or insufficient details about measurements and sampling. These fundamentals, as it turns out, often determine a study's quality and fate in the eyes of reviewers.”

Amid the AI revolution, journal management faces new challenges. Regarding the use of AI in academic research and manuscript submissions, Prof. Zhao adopts an open-minded yet cautious stance. He noted, “Currently, all journals are exploring how to regulate AI use in academic research. My view is that AI is a useful tool—just like a pen or computer—for research, but it must never drive the substance of research. For non-native English speakers, for example, using AI to refine language is acceptable. However, any level of AI involvement must be fully transparent, and authors are responsible for clearly disclosing how and where AI was used in their manuscripts.” He added, “Publishers like Taylor & Francis are now developing AIGC detection tools, but experienced editors can often spot AI-generated text at a glance: it tends to be rigid, superficial, and sometimes tortured in expression, and this is particularly noticeable in cutting-edge fields where AI’s training data are limited. In such cases, over-reliance on AI can notably reduce the quality of one’s work. The key is finding the right balance—we encourage authors to use AI responsibly, with full transparency about its application.”

Parting Wisdom

As our conversation drew to a close, Prof. Zhao gazed at young scholars crisscrossing the campus and reflected, “In twenty years, today's technologies might be obsolete. Yet, two things will endure in health communication research—curiosity to ask meaningful questions, and empathy for the vulnerable.”

His advice to young scholars was both inspiring and grounded in history: “This is an exciting era. Just as radio and television once transformed the world, artificial intelligence is creating unprecedented opportunities for communication studies. Young scholars should seize this moment to pioneer new frontiers in health communication research.”

In this age of unrelenting technological innovation, Prof. Zhao noted the need for health communication researchers to maintain a steadfast focus on the human experience. Perhaps the true beacon of scholarship lies not just at the cutting edge of technology, but also in the depths of our shared humanity.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge Professor Xiaoquan Zhao for his insightful interview, which served as the intellectual foundation for this article. Appreciation is also extended to Professor Jing Xu and the School of Journalism and Communication at Peking University for organizing the event that made this work possible.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Yueliang Jiang  <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2080-353X>

Siyu Pu  <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4958-595X>

Haoyi Liu  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3072-5798>

Note

Dr. Xiaoquan Zhao is a Professor in the Department of Communication at George Mason University and serves as the Editor-in-Chief of *Health Communication*. He earned his Ph.D. in Communication from the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania in 2005. Dr. Zhao’s research spans a broad range of areas, including health communication, persuasive messaging, media effects, information-seeking behaviour, tobacco control, and climate change communication. From 2013 to 2014, he served as a Tobacco Regulatory Science Fellow at

the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Centre for Tobacco Products. He currently holds the position of Scientific Advisor for Research and Evaluation in the Office of Health Communication and Education at the same centre.

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