

Standing at the Intersection of Health Communication and Computational Communication: Exclusive Interview with Prof. Jingbo Meng

Yixin Bai^{a*} and Jianan Ling^a

^a*School of Journalism and Communication, Peking University*

Abstract: Professor Meng Jingbo is a 2006 graduate of the School of Journalism and Communication at Peking University and holds a doctoral degree from the University of Southern California. She currently serves as an Associate Professor at the School of Communication of The Ohio State University.

During the MHM 2025 Conference, we invited Professor Meng to share her experiences and insights with us. In terms of academic research, Professor Meng pointed out that there were differences in the application of artificial intelligence (AI) in the field of health communication. Some studies focus on generative AI for creating health communication content, while her own research places a greater emphasis on the intervention perspective—using AI in a conversational and interactive manner to change people's behaviors or thoughts. She believes that although interdisciplinary research poses challenges, it can foster innovation, and the intersection of computational communication and health communication is expected to uncover new research content. When comparing health communication research between China and the United States, she mentions that American social sciences (including communication studies) emphasize the development of universal theories and attach importance to verifying and advancing theories through quantitative empirical research. In contrast, domestic research in China can examine universal theories by considering differences in culture, social structure, and policies, and can also focus on characteristics specific to the Chinese context, such as traditional Chinese medicine (TCM),

to conduct theoretical construction and form sustainable research. For researchers who lack a background in computational communication but wish to apply this method, she suggests using AI tools or collaborating with others to collect data. She emphasizes that computational communication is more about a shift in research perspective, and traditional statistical methods are still applicable. Clarifying research questions and having a research vision are more crucial than the method itself. At the same time, she advises students interested in relevant interdisciplinary fields to develop a passion for data, take related courses, and dare to try new things to cope with the uncertainties in the development of the field.

Keywords: Health Communication, Computational Communication, Artificial Intelligence

Question 1: Professor Meng, could you please introduce yourself to the readers of our official WeChat account?

I enrolled in 2002 and graduated from the School of Journalism and Communication at Peking University in 2006. I obtained my doctoral degree from the University of Southern California. My first job was at Michigan State University, where I worked for eight years and earned tenure. In 2022, I joined the School of Communication at The Ohio State University as an associate professor, and I also hold an adjunct position in the Department of Biomedical Informatics and the Translational Data Analytics Institute. Additionally, I am a co-founder of the Computational and Statistical Modeling Research Group(COSMOS), Director of the Communication and Computational Well-being Laboratory(Cwell), and the current Chair of the Health Communication Division of the International Communication Association(ICA).

Question 2: Do you miss your life at Peking University, and what are the differences between then and now?

I still miss it very much. I lived in Building 49 during my time at the university, when I was studying in the Department of Journalism. I remember there were also programs such as Advertising and News Publishing. Among the many courses I took, Sociological Methodology left the deepest impression on me. It sparked my interest in scientific research and taught me to approach social issues through systematic and empirical methods. Another course was Statistics, which laid a solid quantitative foundation that later became invaluable to my work in computational communication. It not only enhanced my ability to analyze data but also helped me embrace computational approaches as a natural extension of social science research.

Question 3: What can artificial intelligence bring to health communication research?

This topic actually covers a wide range. In the speeches delivered by various professors at the MHM Conference, there were significant differences in how researchers applied AI in their studies. In the field of health communication, some studies focus on whether generative AI can help create health communication information and content. My own research, however, places more emphasis on the intervention perspective. The content generated by AI does not necessarily need to be delivered to a broad audience through mass media; instead, it can be used in a more conversational and interactive way to change people's behaviors or thoughts.

Therefore, the ways of applying AI are indeed quite different. From an academic perspective, this interdisciplinary research approach often brings me many exciting moments and interesting ideas, which are conducive to conducting innovative research—this is what I personally enjoy.

On the other hand, the process of learning and practicing this research approach is indeed more challenging. Traditional research methods and topics have examples from previous scholars for reference, allowing us to conduct such research well and perfectly. However, if we want to achieve more innovative results, I believe that many innovations arise at the intersection of two or three related but different fields. Computational communication is actually an interdisciplinary field in itself, and the intersection of computational communication and health communication should reveal many new insights—this is also the interesting part of doing research.

I find that really exciting, because interdisciplinary research like this constantly brings new ideas and possibilities. It's also what makes the work fun for me—there's a lot of space to be creative. At the same time, it's definitely more challenging. Traditional research areas

come with established examples and methods we can build on, but with something new like this, you have to figure things out as you go. I've always believed that real innovation happens at the intersections of fields. Computational communication itself is already interdisciplinary, and when it connects with health communication, it opens up a whole new way of thinking about how technology can support human well-being.

Question 4: What are the differences or commonalities between health communication research in China and the United States?

This is actually my first time attending a health communication conference in China, and I came with the goal of learning—about the kinds of research topics, questions, and methods that domestic scholars are exploring. In different social and cultural contexts, people naturally focus on different issues, so it's been a great opportunity to see those contrasts firsthand.

One thing that stood out to me, especially during the High-Table Forum at the MHM Conference, is how the research traditions differ between China and the United States. In the U. S., social science research—including communication studies—tends to place a strong emphasis on theory building. Scholars aim to develop theories that have a certain degree of universality, grounded in the belief that human communication follows general patterns that transcend culture or nationality. As Professors Chen Liang and Chen Hongliang mentioned at the forum, American health communication research often focuses on testing and refining these theories through large-scale empirical studies and quantitative data collection.

In China, I see tremendous potential to connect with and also expand beyond that framework. Based on what I've learned here, domestic researchers could integrate with

Western paradigms in two ways. First, by examining how cultural, social, and policy differences in China may shape or challenge what are considered “universal” theories. And second, by building new theories rooted in uniquely Chinese perspectives—such as concepts from Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which have no direct equivalents in the West. Once such indigenous theories are established, future scholars can test, refine, and build upon them. That’s how a sustainable line of research develops—where each study doesn’t stand alone but contributes to a growing and evolving scholarly conversation.

Question 5: If a researcher has not systematically studied computational communication-related research methods but wants to apply them in their research, what suggestions do you have?

Computational communication might sound intimidating at first, but it really doesn’t have to be. I usually tell students or colleagues that it has two main parts—data collection and data analysis. For those with a liberal arts background, it’s not necessary to master programming or web scraping right away. These days, AI tools can help generate code, and there are many existing platforms that make data collection easier. Another great option is collaboration—working with researchers from computer science, data science, or information science can be very productive and rewarding.

Question 6: What suggestions or preparations do you have for younger students (junior fellow students and younger schoolmates) who want to delve into interdisciplinary fields such as computational communication and health communication?

For younger students interested in interdisciplinary fields like computational communication and health communication, I have a few suggestions.

First, develop a passion for data. Some students may think that data or statistics don't belong in the liberal arts, but in reality, the two are inseparable. Communication studies, especially journalism and communication, bridge both the humanistic and scientific ways of understanding the world. To better integrate humanistic values with data-driven methods, it is essential to have a good grasp of both humanistic values and data analytical approaches.

Take courses like statistics or other

classes related to computational communication; they will give you the tools to think critically and work creatively with data. Nowadays, there are far more learning opportunities than before; for example, many universities offer summer courses, workshops, and online seminars that make it easy to get started.

Second, dare to try new things. As the Chinese saying goes, "a raw jade needs polishing. "Following well-established paths can help you produce solid, refined work—but the real breakthroughs often come from exploring uncharted directions. Doing something new will always involve uncertainty, but it also opens the door to innovation. Sometimes, you simply need to dare to take a path that no one has taken before to open up new avenues for the future.

Lastly, remember that the world is changing incredibly fast. Many times, we may feel that a certain path is difficult and full of uncertainties at the moment. But if we can stay focused and patient work on it for two or three years, we may find that there are like-minded people also working on it, and what once seemed like a small area can grow into a thriving field in the next three to five years.