Journal of Medicine, Humanity and Media 2026
Vol. 4, No. 4. https://doi.org/10.62787/8rgfxt39

Interview with Professor Shaunak Sastry: Rethinking Health Communication, Lived Experience, and Community Engagement

Haoyi Liu[1]*, Yawen Bao[1]

[1] City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China; [2] School of Culture and Health Communication, Tianjin University of Traditional Chinese MedicineBeijing Normal University, Beijing, China

Abstract

This interview with Professor Shaunak Sastry, conducted during MHM2026, explores the evolving role of human experience, community engagement, and critical reflection in health communication research. Building on his keynote address, "The human IS the loop: Cultural Insight, Structural Critique, and the Future of (Critical) Health Communication," Professor Sastry reflects on his interdisciplinary academic journey and the importance of self-reflexivity in an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence (AI). Drawing on his fieldwork and community-engaged research, he emphasizes the value of lived experience and local knowledge in understanding complex health challenges, arguing that meaningful research must begin with listening to communities and recognizing individuals as experts in their own lives. He further discusses the ethical responsibilities of researchers, particularly the need to connect academic knowledge with practical impact while remaining transparent about the limitations of research. Finally, Professor Sastry offers advice to early-career scholars, highlighting intellectual exploration, mentorship, collaboration, and the importance of scholarly communities. Throughout the interview, he underscores that the future of health communication depends not only on technological advancement but also on sustained attention to human experience, structural inequalities, and collective knowledge production.

Keywords: Health Communication; Artificial Intelligence; Self-reflexivity; Community-Engaged Research; Lived Experience; Scholarly Community

At MHM2026, Professor Shaunak Sastry delivered a keynote titled "The human IS the loop: Cultural Insight, Structural Critique, and the Future of (Critical) Health Communication." In the interview that followed, he drew on his interdisciplinary background and community fieldwork to discuss self-reflexivity in the age of AI, how community members understand and describe their own lives, the real-world impact of research, and how early-career scholars can find their way within an academic community.

Corresponding author: Haoyi Liu, City University of Hong Kong, Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon, Hong Kong SAR, China. **Email:** 954614983@qq.com. © The Author(s), 2026. Published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0; https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, distribution, adaptation, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

A Cross-Disciplinary Journey Shaped by Experience

Professor Sastry's academic path did not follow a route mapped out in advance. He studied psychology at St. Xavier's College in Mumbai, India, then completed a master's degree in communications management and spent time working in industry. It was only after he entered Purdue University that he encountered the broader possibilities of communication research.

"Earlier, growing up in India, my understanding of communication research was rather limited. I thought of it as mass communication, messaging, or strategic communication, such as advertising. Being exposed to the wider field of communication research in the United States broadened my horizons and helped me identify how I wanted to specialize."

His doctoral fieldwork ultimately led him into health communication and community-engaged research. He joined a large project in Gary, Indiana, a historic city facing poverty, limited civic infrastructure, and multiple systemic health problems. Working alongside community members in the field was where, as he put it, he truly learned the skills of health communication and community-engaged research.

His dissertation later focused on HIV/AIDS risk among truck drivers in India. He traveled with the drivers and asked how they understood HIV risk and safe sex. Looking back, he describes this path as one shaped by experience:

"For me, the direction was not so much academic as experiential. It was based more on things that I found I could contribute to or learn from, rather than on picking a track that would lead me to a particular job."

"The human IS the loop": The More Powerful AI Becomes, the More We Need to Understand Human Experience

"The human IS the loop" is not presented as a fully formed theoretical conclusion. Rather, Professor Sastry describes it as an exploratory provocation intended to encourage students and health communication scholars to think more critically about AI.

He does not dismiss the possibilities of AI, but he is not yet convinced that it should be treated as universally beneficial or as a neutral technology. Infant mortality, for example, can reflect the strength of a health system, but it is also tied to how a society organizes work, family life, and the distribution of resources. Do mothers have time off and time to recover? Do families have adequate nutrition and social support?

From there, he brings "The human IS the loop" back to the core of health communication:

"Health communication is a practice of trying to understand what makes us human and what makes us healthy."

When discussing the abilities researchers need to cultivate, Professor Sastry places particular emphasis on self-reflexivity. Every act of communication, he explains, carries not only an

intended message but also meanings that go beyond the surface; what a speaker says also reveals something about who they are and what they value.

In his work with truck drivers, Professor Sastry sometimes approached participants as a doctoral researcher and implicit "expert." At times, participants turned his own question back on him. He realized that he was unprepared to answer because he had assumed that the researcher asked questions without having to explain himself. The encounter showed him that researchers must attend not only to participants' answers, but also to the position from which they enter the field and the effects that asking a question can have.

As AI becomes more capable of processing information, researchers will need to focus more on how complex meanings take shape in relationships, cross-cultural encounters, and health interactions. Technological advances do not make self-reflexivity less important; they make the ability to understand human experience more essential to communication research.

From Lived Experience to Real-World Impact: Research Begins with Listening

Commenting on his growing research program on climate change communication, which includes work funded by the National Institutes of Health, as well as global projects in sites like India and Sierra Leone, Professor Sastry began by discussing how community members understand and describe their own lives.

Community members may not know the scientific terminology of climate change or the recommendations of bodies such as the IPCC or the United Nations. They do know, however, that they must now travel farther into the ocean to fish for food.

A person may not say that they are experiencing a "mental health problem." Instead, they may say, "I don't sleep at night because my children don't have enough food to eat." Such statements may not use expert language, but they make visible the links among climate, livelihood, nutrition, and psychological distress.

"Every person is an expert on their own life."

This is a central premise of Professor Sastry's approach to community research. A person may not have had access to formal education or the academic vocabulary used to describe their circumstances, yet they still understand more clearly than someone who has not shared that experience what prevents them from being healthy.

The communication scholar's responsibility is to begin by understanding how community members describe their experience and what those accounts mean in the local context, then connect that understanding to scientific knowledge and create a feedback loop between lived experience and expert knowledge. Professor Sastry argues that if everything outside a policy agenda is dismissed as "unscientific," progress on these health problems becomes much harder.

When discussing what makes research meaningful, Professor Sastry further stresses the need for honesty with communities. Community-engaged research often involves people living in poverty, without access to healthcare, or struggling to obtain enough food. Researchers must be candid

about what a study can and cannot do. One study may not solve hunger, but it may help us understand how people obtain the resources they need. What researchers cannot do is promise that a study will solve every problem a community faces.

For Professor Sastry, research outcomes cannot be measured only by the number of publications. The more important question is whether the work makes a difference in the world and in people's lives. That difference may be small, but if researchers genuinely care about the problem and help move things forward, even slightly, the work matters.

Growing Through Exploration: Research Is Not a Zero-Sum Game

Research projects do not always unfold as planned. Professor Sastry notes that even senior scholars struggle with projects that appear to be going nowhere but remain difficult to let go. The decision to persist or change direction depends on one's career stage and immediate goals; there is no single answer that works for everyone.

He thinks of a research career as several pipelines running in parallel. A blockage in one project does not mean that all work has to stop. Researchers can continue in other directions and return to the original problem weeks, months, or even years later. For students early in their careers, keeping several possibilities open is especially important. At that stage, "you do not yet know what you do not know," so students need not define themselves too early as one particular kind of scholar. Graduate education is a time to learn broadly, encounter different approaches, and discover questions worth pursuing over the long term.

Learning to do research is also a form of apprenticeship. Students work with an adviser, observe how that person solves problems, and later apply those approaches to the questions that matter to them. The goal is not mechanical imitation but understanding why an expert acts as they do. An adviser provides a toolbox and demonstrates how to use it; how students ultimately use those tools is their decision.

In his message to MHM2026 participants, Professor Sastry turned to the importance of scholarly community:

"Research is not a zero-sum game. It takes a community of scholars to build a field."

There is no single correct or incorrect way to do health communication. A field grows when different forms of knowledge, methods, and experience support one another, rather than through competition that diminishes others. Early-career scholars should seek mentors, colleagues, and collaborators who help them grow, while preserving space for mutual learning through critique and discussion.

Conclusion

From “The human IS the loop” to lived experience, self-reflexivity, and scholarly community, Professor Sastry’s reflections return to one question: How should health communication respond to people’s lives?

Rather than offering a simple answer about whether AI should be embraced or rejected, Professor Sastry offers a more fundamental reminder: technology should not take the place of asking what makes us human; expert language should not obscure lived experience; and the number of publications should not become the sole measure of whether research matters. The future of health communication, he suggests, will continue to take shape through mutual understanding, collaboration, and shared practice.