

TRIBUNE



# Introduction to the Special Issue on Mental Health and Communication

*Introducció al número espacial sobre salut mental i comunicació*

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Secularly treated as a minor dimension of overall health, the World Health Organization (2022) estimates that countries spend less than 2% of their health budgets in mental health, even though one in eight people worldwide are believed to suffer from a mental disorder, and half of the population of the world lives in areas where there is only one psychologist for every 200,000 people or more. The tide seems to be changing, and mental health is becoming growingly acknowledged as an issue that needs to be properly funded and openly discussed both in public and private spheres.

For many people living in parts of the globe where mental health is often overlooked, media content constitutes the only plausible way of becoming familiarized with mental health issues. The media and communication industries should play a pivotal role in representing mental health properly, in ways that accurately reflect its relevance and prevalence, offering media consumers reliable depictions of individuals with mental health problems that avoid stigmatization, romanticization, and other demeaning portrayals (Wahl 1995). Such accurate representations are not always the norm. For instance, the portrayal of mental health issues on television, cinema, and other media platforms has been a subject of controversy. Historically, individuals depicted as suffering a mental illness have been inaccurately represented, their condition exaggerated, and very often presented as dangerous, violent people (Klin & Lemish 2008). Furthermore, journalistic reports often select frames to publish their news articles that emphasize conflict and tension, creating moral panics about the social determinants of mental health that have

insufficient empirical evidence. An example of moral panic identifying communication technologies as the source of psychological distress is the relationship between social media and mental health (Walsh 2020). Social media is often targeted as one of the principal causes for the deteriorating mental health of young people. However, most meta-analyses, systematic and umbrella reviews find minor associations, if any, between mental health problems and social media consumption (Keles *et al.* 2020; Valkenburg *et al.* 2022). This example shows how oversimplified debates about the effects of communication on mental health are not useful in nurturing the critical thinking ability of citizens.

The transformation of media consumers into media producers managing their own broadcast has expanded the horizons of what was possible to see. Individuals with these serious conditions expose themselves in an effort to minimize their isolation, to use media content publication as a complement to psychotherapy, and to fight stigma (Sangeorzan *et al.* 2019). Consumers can watch on *YouTube* vivid, personal testimonies from people with severe mental disorders such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, an insight very difficult to gain in recent decades without a close acquaintance in one's own family. If done responsibly, this can be liberating for those with mental issues and educational for those without them. For those undiagnosed yet, finding people with similar struggles can facilitate the search for professional help.

Conversely, the peril of the normalization of openly talking about one's mental health issues is the glamourization of being mentally unhealthy. Some analyses on many media contents depicting mental health issues have observed that characters with mental disorders can be romanticized (Dunn 2017), a tendency that has migrated to social media platforms where some users talk about their mental problems as something desirable that adds attractiveness to a person (Jadayel *et al.* 2017). For some people, mental health issues might come with an aura of mystery, as if they only happened to people with profound, multi-layered, psychologically complex minds as opposed to simple-minded, psychologically healthy individuals.

The field of communication can learn a lot from how psychology has investigated media and communication-related technological determinants of psychological wellbeing. Take the case of the research on behavioral addictions (i.e., addictions that do not entail the intake of a substance), which illustrate well how technological advances pose new psychological threats to users in many aspects. First, advertising campaigns on social media can target specific individuals based on their past behavior, which can be extremely dangerous if such targeting uncovers and exploits user vulnerabilities (e.g., showing ads to gamble when an individual behaves erratically on the internet). Second, user interface design of many communication platforms including social media networks such as *TikTok* but also streaming services like *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime Video*, include features that make it difficult for users to abandon them. For instance, for many media industries, time on device is a crucial metric that highlights the engagement ability of a service, which translates into higher retention of subscribers. In gambling studies, time on device is a very well-known estimate of how addictive a gambling product is (Schull 2005). Similarly, time on device should be carefully explored in communication contexts because of its exploitation in video game designs (Bartlett 2019) and streaming platforms alike (Schaffner *et al.* 2023).

All in all, the intersection of the remits of media, communication and mental health is certainly a fruitful one, likely to grow in relevance as mental health awareness rises

internationally, and the public perception of the perils of the media and communication technology becomes more widespread.

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