

Editorial

The topic of ‘mental health,’ which is currently the subject of much public discussion, is also a rapidly growing area of research that has gained further momentum due to the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic, including long-term effects, lockdowns, or economic instability. However, public and scientific discourses surrounding mental health and illness, as well as the social challenges of caring for individuals experiencing mental health issues or psychological distress, are not new phenomena.

For over a century, mental health communication has been a recurring feature of the printed press. In the United States, this public discourse was framed under the banner of mental hygiene, offering readers guidance on how to maintain psychological balance and mental distress. Illustrated magazines were at the forefront of promoting treatments for mental health and also played a role in commercializing concepts such as ‘melancholy’ or ‘hysteria’ through product advertisements (Ingenkamp, 2012, p. 194; Hirshbein, 2009, p. 20). As Laura D. Hirshbein shows for the interwar period, especially the 1930s, popular and medical discourses increasingly linked depressive moods to the pressures of modern life while promoting self-regulation and emotional adjustment as normative responses to social and economic instability (Hirshbein, 2009). Beyond explicitly medical advice, commercial products were also embedded in these narratives of mental wellbeing: as Ella Chorazy (2020) shows, early Coca-Cola advertisements promoted the drink as a “brain tonic” capable of calming nerves and alleviating mental fatigue. Similarly, Judith Levin demonstrates that early soft drinks emerged from a tradition of patent medicines and were marketed with quasi-therapeutic promises, positioning carbonation and stimulation as forms of relief from stress and nervous exhaustion (Levin, 2021). Such media practices exemplify how knowledge about mental health circulated beyond medical institutions and became embedded in everyday culture, media production and consumption (Parry & Phan, 2025; Scherr, 2016), reflecting what Michel Foucault described as the historically contingent discursive production of madness.

Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization. History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1969) offers a conceptual framework that remains highly productive for analyzing mental health communication from today’s perspective. Rather than approaching ‘madness’ as a stable medical category, Foucault interrogates the structural (discursive) conditions under which ‘madness’ emerges as an object of knowledge, regulation, and exclusion. His central concern is not the pathology of individuals per se, but the discursive and institutional formations through which the figure of the ‘mad person’ is constituted in opposition to reason. In this perspective, madness does not precede its social interpretations – it is produced within historically specific regimes of knowledge, language, and scientific practice. At the core of Foucault’s argument lies the proposition that structures of thought

do not exist independently of human actors, yet they cannot be reduced to individual intentions. Structures are realized through communication – through acting subjects – while simultaneously shaping what can be said, known, and enacted.

This is precisely what renders Foucault’s perspective valuable to this day and, at the same time, confers relevance upon the present issue: The focus lies on viewing mental health in its interrelation and entanglement with communication practices that need to be seen as historical per se. It is about the insight that historical and structural conditions operate only through processes of linguistically (media) mediated interaction. To understand these conditions is therefore essential for grasping how individuals come to understand themselves, how they acquire and appropriate the concepts through which they interpret health, illness, and subjectivity. This is not to suggest, however, that such an approach already explains what individuals actually select, articulate and negotiate in everyday life. These processes remain contingent, dynamic, and beyond the scope of what this issue can fully address.

From the combined perspectives of communication studies, history, and psychology, it is our explicit aim as editors to trace these structural conditions at selected historical junctures. Especially psychologists profit from such analyses, as their approaches often – naturally – remain on the ‘micro’ level, deeming mental health communication as something done by individuals alone. The strength in using Foucault as a meta-perspective on the issue is that his analysis is directed towards actors, institutions, and practices but it does not begin from experiential interiority. Instead, it examines how historical figures, medical authorities, and institutional arrangement participate in communicating the distinctions between reason and unreason.

Against this backdrop, and for the study of mental health communication, Foucault’s framework provides some interesting insights: First, it foregrounds the historical contingency of categories that continue to structure public discourse. And second, it directs attention to the interplay between knowledge, language, and institutional practice in producing distinctions between health and pathology. Historically developing media environments, from journalistic representations to algorithmically curated platforms, can be read as sites where these dynamics persist in transformed guise.

Mental health communication thus appears not merely as the transmission of information, but as a field in which the meaning of concepts, individual experience, and socially accepted behavior are continuously negotiated. The articles in this issue demonstrate how, since around 1900, the mass media has publicly intertwined medical information, commercial interests and ideas about mental distress, thereby shaping our understandings of mental health and how it has been communicated from past to present times.

This issue begins with **Rodríguez-Alfonso’s** analysis of advertisements for mental health products aimed at

women in late nineteenth-century magazines. In “Selling Sanity,” she shows how print advertising functioned as an interface where medicalization, gender norms, and commercialization converged, linking medical knowledge with consumer culture and normative images of femininity.

With the article “Diagnosen, die Geschichte schrieben: Fern- und retrospektive Diagnosen am Beispiel Wilhelms II. und Adolf Hitlers”, the authors **Mathias Schmidt**, **David Freis** and **Saskia Wilhelmy** show how the retrospective diagnoses of historical figures become an instrument for interpreting history itself. Their analysis highlights the importance of the interpretation of psychological dynamics of political actors and how the political dimension of medical/psychological categories is negotiated publicly.

Michaela Hintermayr’s article “Unseen Struggles—Nursing and Mental Health in Times of Covid-19” allows this issue to move on to an analysis of the twentieth first century using the example of the COVID-19 pandemic as recent historical event. In her analysis of online newspaper articles, she reconstructs the representation of

nursing and health care workers during times of crisis, uncertainty and mental stress and concludes about the pre-existing structural lack of support for healthcare work that is accompanying this public discourse. This shows how media cannot be seen as neutral transmitters, but as active actors.

Lastly, **Marla Bader** and **Sidney Grunenberg** contribute to the Research Corner of this issue with their article “Suizidbezogene Postings auf TikTok. Der Zusammenhang von algorithmischer Sichtbarkeit und Kommunikationspraktiken.” Their analysis of Tiktok uploads and comments shed light on the platformization and algorithmization of the mental health online communication. Their analysis might initiate future discussions exploring how lay communication may intertwine and/or clash with psychological, medical and scientific discourse.

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