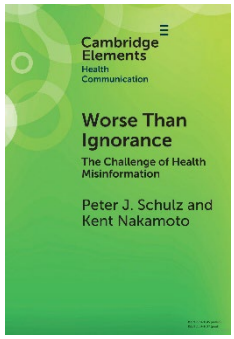

Worse Than Ignorance: The Challenge of Health Misinformation

Schulz, P. J., & Nakamoto, K. (2024). *Worse than ignorance: The challenge of health misinformation*. Cambridge University Press.

Hossein Davari

In *Worse Than Ignorance: The Challenge of Health Misinformation*, a compelling addition to the Elements in 'Health Communication' series, the authors examine the complex and evolving landscape of health misinformation. This book explores how the changing dynamics of doctor-patient relationships and advancements in information technology have created a rich yet challenging environment for patients seeking accurate health information. As patient empowerment grows, so does the risk of misinformation, which not only hampers informed decision-making but also proves difficult to correct. Through its short preface, introduction and five sections, this compact book offers a detailed examination of these challenges and suggests that fostering trust between healthcare professionals and patients is crucial for improving communication and promoting accurate health knowledge.

The book's 'Preface' and its 'Introduction' with the title of 'The Problem of Knowledge Failures in Health' provide a comprehensive overview of the persistent challenges in health communication, despite significant advancements in medical technology and public health. The preface frames these challenges as a 'catalogue of disappointment', highlighting how the promise of improved health through information technology remains unfulfilled. It emphasises that health communication failures are not minor glitches but foundational problems linked to the nature of knowledge and psychological processes that lead to misinformation.

The introduction expands on these themes by discussing the evolution of health as a concept that encompasses physical, mental, and social well-being. It notes that while medical innovations have revolutionised healthcare, the spread of misinformation, particularly during global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasises the need for effective communication strategies. The introduction highlights how the internet has transformed the way people seek health information, often leading to misinformation due to unfiltered and conflicting data. It distinguishes between misinformation (believing false information) and ignorance (lack of knowledge), emphasising that both are critical issues in health communication. Taken together, the preface and introduction set the stage for a detailed exploration of the complex issues surrounding health misinformation, emphasising the need for improved communication strategies and trust between healthcare professionals and patients to address these challenges effectively.

The first section, titled "The growth of health misinformation", explores the evolution and impact of health misinformation, tracing its roots from ancient medical theories to the modern digital age. It highlights how misinformation has always existed in healthcare, from the four humours theory to unproven folk remedies. However, the advent of the internet and social media has dramatically amplified the spread of medical misinformation. In addition, the changing doctor-patient relationship is examined, noting the shift from paternalistic approaches to patient empowerment and autonomy. This transition, while ethically important, has created new challenges in health communication. The text discusses the concept of health literacy and its crucial role in patient outcomes, emphasising the complexities of providing comprehensible and usable health information. Then, direct-to-consumer advertising (DTCA) of prescription medications is presented as a significant development in health communication, with proponents arguing it empowers patients and opponents claiming it misleads consumers. The rise of the internet as a primary source of health information is detailed, noting its rapid growth and profound impact on how people access and interpret medical knowledge.

The section highlights the double-edged nature of internet health information. While it offers unprecedented access to medical knowledge, it also exposes users to misinformation, incomplete data, and potentially harmful advice.

The text emphasises the challenges of distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources online, especially when using general search engines.

The second section titled "What does it mean to be misinformed?" offers a thought-provoking exploration of health misinformation and the complex nature of knowledge in the medical domain. The authors deal with fundamental questions about what it means to be misinformed and how people come to hold inaccurate beliefs about health and medicine. The section begins by examining the philosophical foundations of knowledge, tracing debates from Plato and Aristotle to modern epistemology. It presents knowledge as a fallible yet justified belief, emphasising the role of background knowledge and experience in interpreting new information. The authors skilfully explain concepts like abductive reasoning and how experts like physicians apply their knowledge to make diagnoses.

A key strength is the subtle discussion of subjectivity in knowledge. The authors draw on Searle's distinctions between epistemic and ontological objectivity/subjectivity to illuminate how social facts and institutional realities shape our understanding of health issues. This provides valuable context for considering why some health beliefs persist despite contradicting scientific evidence. The section excels in its analysis of how misinformation takes hold, arguing that flawed beliefs often arise through the same cognitive processes as accurate knowledge. It highlights how coherent but inaccurate worldviews can be difficult to dislodge, as seen in the case of vaccine hesitancy.

Section 3, "Patterns of health knowledge failure", explores the complex issue of health knowledge failures, focusing on three distinct types: ignorance, low literacy, and misinformation. The authors provide a comprehensive analysis of how people come to "get it wrong" in health-related matters. The section begins by examining ignorance, which stems from lack of awareness or disinterest in health topics. It then introduces low literacy, discussing various measures of health literacy and their implications for patient outcomes. The authors highlight the evolution of health literacy concepts, expanding from basic reading comprehension to more complex skills like information analysis and application.

A significant portion of the section is focused on misinformation, exploring how people come to believe incorrect information despite having the interest and ability to assess health issues. The authors examine cognitive biases, particularly confirmation bias, and how they contribute to the persistence of misinformation. They also discuss the problem of overconfidence, where individuals overestimate their knowledge and abilities, making them resistant to correction.

The section also introduces an important distinction between health literacy and patient empowerment, arguing that these concepts, while interrelated, are distinct and can sometimes be misaligned. This misalignment can lead to potentially dangerous situations where empowered patients make poor health decisions based on misinformation. The authors conclude by emphasising the need for bounded literacy and empowerment, where patients have sufficient knowledge to participate in their healthcare decisions but also recognise the limits of their expertise and when to seek professional help.

The fourth section, "Addressing knowledge failures", explores the complex challenges of addressing health knowledge failures, particularly focusing on misinformation. The authors present a comprehensive analysis of why misinformation is so difficult to correct and why traditional educational approaches often fall short. It first attempts to distinguish between being uninformed and misinformed, emphasising that misinformation leads to systematic errors in judgment. It then examines the multifaceted nature of health literacy, outlining four key consumer abilities essential for making informed health decisions.

A significant portion of the section is dedicated to examining why people "fall for" misinformation. The authors discuss cognitive processes, such as heuristic thinking and the impact of emotions on decision-making. They highlight how factors like repetition, fluency, and source credibility can influence the acceptance of false information. The persistence of misinformation is also explored in depth, with the authors explaining how the modern information environment, the coherence of knowledge networks, and individuals' confidence in their beliefs contribute to the problem. The section also examines the limited success of corrective campaigns and the challenges they face in changing deeply held beliefs. In this section, the authors present various strategies for addressing misinformation, including fact-based corrections, attacking logical fallacies, and improving media literacy. However, they acknowledge the limitations of these approaches, particularly when dealing with strongly held attitudes.

The section concludes by emphasising the importance of the doctor-patient relationship in managing misinformation. It suggests that trust between healthcare providers and patients may be a crucial factor in preventing and correcting misinformation.

The fifth section explores the critical role of the doctor-patient relationship in managing health misinformation. The authors argue that while the internet has dramatically increased access to health information, it has also led to a proliferation of misinformation, which is difficult to correct through traditional means. The section emphasises the importance of trust between doctors and patients in countering misinformation. It discusses how changes in healthcare delivery, including increased specialisation and the rise of managed care, have challenged this trust. Despite these challenges, the authors note that patients still value their doctors' expertise in interpreting health information.

This concluding section presents a conceptual model of doctor-patient information alignment, illustrating the various scenarios that can arise when patients and doctors have differing perceptions of health information. It suggests that physicians must adapt their communication strategies to address these misalignments effectively. The authors argue against attempting to restrict access to health information online, instead advocating for physicians to guide patients towards accurate and relevant information. They stress the need for doctors to develop strategies for addressing misinformation, including offering decision-making assistance, being sensitive to patients' backgrounds, and educating patients about evaluating information sources.

The section concludes with a long-term perspective on combating health misinformation, citing the successful reduction of smoking rates as an example of how coordinated efforts can change public health behaviours over time. It suggests that while misinformation remains a significant challenge, a combination of public health campaigns, policy interventions, and individual-level interactions between doctors and patients offers a promising path forward.

In conclusion, *Worse than ignorance: The challenge of health misinformation* is a valuable contribution that provides a solid theoretical foundation for understanding the persistence of health misinformation in the modern information landscape. While dense at times, the writing is generally clear and well-structured. However, the book would benefit from more discussion of practical implications and potential solutions to health misinformation. More precisely, while the book excels in diagnosing the issue and dissecting its complexities, it falls short in offering actionable solutions. The discussions on strategies for addressing misinformation – such as improving health literacy, enhancing doctor-patient trust, and guiding patients toward reliable sources – are insightful but lack sufficient practical detail. For instance, while the authors emphasise the importance of trust in the doctor-patient relationship, they do not fully explore how healthcare systems can operationalise this trust in environments constrained by time and resources. Similarly, their critique of corrective campaigns highlights their limitations but does not propose innovative alternatives to overcome these challenges. Furthermore, the book's reliance on theoretical models and historical examples occasionally overshadows its applicability to real-world scenarios. While the authors touch on such contemporary issues as vaccine hesitancy and the COVID-19 pandemic, these examples could have been expanded to provide more concrete guidance for healthcare professionals and policymakers navigating misinformation crises.

In all, despite these shortcomings, the book remains a significant contribution to the field of health communication. Its emphasis on the interplay between patient empowerment, health literacy, and misinformation is particularly valuable in an era where access to information is both a blessing and a curse. The book serves as a call to action for healthcare stakeholders to rethink communication strategies and prioritise trust-building as a cornerstone for combating misinformation. It provides a thorough and insightful examination of the complexities surrounding health misinformation, offering valuable perspectives for healthcare professionals, policymakers, and researchers working to improve health communication. Undoubtedly, it is an essential read for those seeking to grasp the complexities of health communication, but may leave readers searching for more concrete tools to address one of the most pressing issues in modern healthcare: the persistence and impact of health misinformation.

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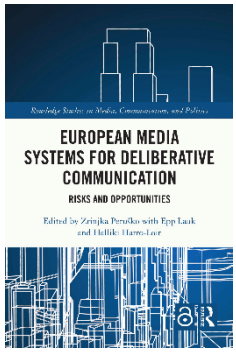

Deliberative Democracy Through Media Systems: A Fuzzy Set Analysis of European Cases

Peruško, Z., Lauk E., & Harro-Loit, H. (Eds.). (2024). *European media systems for deliberative communication: Risks and opportunities*. Routledge.

Jan Miessler

The relationship between media and politics has been central to comparative media research since Siebert et al.'s (1956) *Four Theories of the Press* and Hallin and Mancini's (2004) seminal *Comparing Media Systems*. The volume edited by Peruško, Lauk, and Harro-Loit provides an innovative empirical approach to this relationship by employing fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to identify which configurations of media system dimensions enable "deliberative communication"—a crucial component for achieving the normative ideal of deliberative democracy.

Drawing essentially on Habermasian public sphere theory, this comparative project analyses 14 European countries selected to represent the continent's diversity. The central assumption is that media systems must enable citizens to make informed and rational political choices for democracy to function effectively. However, rather than assuming simple media determinism, the authors examine complex configurational relationships between media characteristics and democratic outcomes. This represents a significant departure from previous comparative media research that has largely focused on classifying media systems or describing their structural evolution without connecting these characteristics to measurable democratic performance.

The book identifies four key dimensions of media systems: legal frameworks for freedom of expression and information, media accountability mechanisms, journalism structures and practices, and audience media usage patterns and competencies. By operationalising these dimensions and combining them with measures of deliberative communication at macro, meso, and micro levels, the authors create an innovative deliberative communication index. This multi-level operationalisation is particularly noteworthy, as it moves beyond the typical focus on either institutional or individual aspects of deliberation to provide a more holistic measure of democratic communication.

The deliberative communication index combines the V-Dem deliberative component index (representing institutional-level deliberation) with measures of citizen political discussion, knowledge, interpersonal trust, and societal polarisation. This methodological approach represents a significant advance over purely descriptive comparative media research, as it provides an empirical bridge between media system characteristics and normative democratic outcomes. The application of fsQCA methodology is especially appropriate for this research question, as it allows for the identification of complex configurations of conditions that produce similar outcomes while accommodating both structural constraints and actor agency.

The findings reveal that countries from Hallin and Mancini's democratic-corporatist model – Germany, Austria, and Sweden – indeed possess most factors supporting deliberative communication. However, the results are more nuanced than simple regional patterns suggest. Notably, Estonia emerges as the only Central and Eastern European country achieving high deliberative communication scores, demonstrating that historical legacies need not be deterministic. This finding challenges assumptions about post-communist media systems and suggests that specific policy choices and institutional developments can overcome structural disadvantages.

The authors' identification of necessary versus sufficient conditions provides important insights into the complex relationships between media systems and deliberative democracy. Economic development and democratic quality appear as contextual prerequisites – while their presence does not guarantee high deliberative communication, their absence consistently appears with low deliberative communication. This finding does not create a causal paradox but rather suggests that media systems operate within broader structural constraints while retaining agency to influence democratic outcomes. The configurational nature of the analysis reveals that the same outcome can be achieved

through different combinations of conditions, highlighting the equifinality that characterises complex social phenomena.

Several findings challenge conventional wisdom in media studies. The implementation of legal frameworks proves more decisive than their formal existence, suggesting that countries with restrictive laws can still support deliberative communication through favourable implementation of these laws in practice. This insight has significant implications for media policy, as it suggests that enforcement and application matter more than legislative design alone. Similarly, high television market concentration does not necessarily impede deliberative communication, contradicting sceptical assumptions about media concentration's democratic effects. This counterintuitive finding requires further theoretical development but suggests that the relationship between market structure and democratic performance may be more complex than typically assumed.

The emphasis on professional accountability mechanisms, particularly the necessity of professional codes of ethics, aligns with scholarship highlighting the continued importance of journalistic self-regulation in digital environments. The finding that higher trust in and usage of legacy media correlates with deliberative communication, while trust in social media shows the opposite pattern, has significant implications for understanding democratic communication in hybrid media systems. This discovery suggests that despite technological transformation, traditional media institutions continue to play crucial roles in supporting deliberative democracy.

However, the approach used in the book also suffers from certain limitations that merit critical examination. The focus on national media systems may overlook increasingly important transnational and platform-mediated communication flows. In an era where global technology platforms significantly shape information environments within national boundaries, the nation-state framework may have diminishing explanatory power. The book's findings about social media's negative association with deliberative communication, while empirically supported, may reflect platform-specific dynamics rather than inherent characteristics of digital communication.

The reliance on sometimes dated or incomplete comparative data affects reliability across countries and domains. This unevenness is particularly problematic for rapidly changing dimensions like digital media use and social media trust, where data quality and availability vary significantly across the countries studied. The temporal dimension also presents challenges, as the analysis treats conditions and outcomes as contemporaneous, yet many media system characteristics likely develop over extended periods and may have lagged effects on deliberative communication.

Most significantly, combining institutional measures (V-Dem deliberative component) with individual-level indicators (political discussion, knowledge, trust, polarisation) into a single composite index adds together fundamentally different phenomena that may have distinct causal dynamics and theoretical foundations. The inclusion of interpersonal trust as a component of deliberative communication is particularly problematic, as trust may be both a precondition for and consequence of deliberative engagement, potentially creating circular reasoning in the analysis.

The calibration process in fsQCA, while theoretically grounded, involves considerable researcher judgment that could influence findings. The decision to classify countries as having "high" versus "low" deliberative communication based on specific percentile cutoffs appears somewhat arbitrary and lacks sufficient theoretical justification. This methodological concern is compounded by the fact that fsQCA identifies associations between configurations of conditions and outcomes rather than establishing true causal relationships, despite the authors' occasional causal language.

Despite these limitations, the volume makes substantial contributions to comparative media systems research by empirically linking media characteristics to normative democratic outcomes. The book successfully bridges the gap between descriptive media systems research and normative democratic theory, providing evidence-based insights for both scholars and policymakers. The finding that legacy media usage serves as a "core condition" for deliberative communication has important implications for media policy in an era of digital transformation.

The book's emphasis on implementation over formal institutional design also has significant policy implications. If the quality of law enforcement and regulatory practice matters more than legislative frameworks, this suggests that capacity-building and good governance initiatives may be more important for supporting deliberative communication than specific legal reforms.

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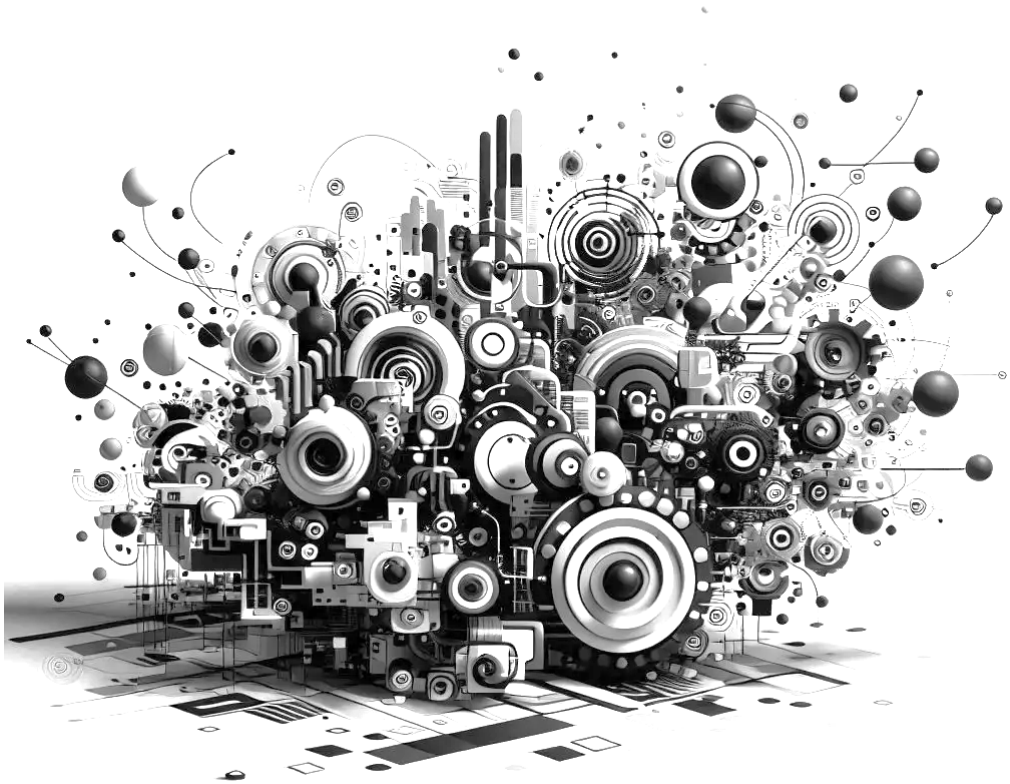

Caught in the Eye: When Reason Goes on a Bus Trip

Melicherčík, I. (2024). *V zajatí oka: Keď je rozum na autobusovom zájazde*. Ivan Melicherčík.

Jakub Prokeš

The monograph *V zajatí oka*, with the subtitle *Keď je rozum na autobusovom zájazde*, represents the latest contribution by Ivan Melicherčík, a significant figure in Slovak art collecting and journalism. The author, who has been systematically engaged in this topic for more than five decades, builds upon his previous publications, e.g., *Čo to vlastne zbierame? Z notesu zberateľa umenia* (2022); *Zberateľ, príbeh bez konca* (2018); *Zberateľ alebo Zmluva s diablom* (2012); *O zberateľstve alebo Delirium collectoris* (2004) (for more information about Melicherčík and his work, see Prokeš, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2022a, 2022b, 2023). However, this new publication transcends the factual documentation of collecting activities and creates a distinctive genre hybrid – combining memoir style, essayistic reflections, and cultural criticism, while addressing not only the aesthetic or investment aspects of collecting but also its psychological, ethical, and social consequences (Prokeš, 2025).

From a thematic perspective, it is a comprehensive reflection on the phenomenon of collecting – not only as a social phenomenon or form of investment, but primarily as a life philosophy, identity, and personal passion. Through analysis of motives of ownership, preservation, and protection of artistic artifacts, Melicherčík also highlights the shadowy aspects: the art market, forgeries, media manipulation, the weakness of cultural institutions, and dilemmas related to legacy. These elements add depth to the text, enabling the reader to understand that collecting is a multi-layered phenomenon influenced not only by personal passion but also by power, economics, and cultural memory.

The book is structured into many shorter segments – essayistic reflections, critical glosses, personal stories, and field notes. This format corresponds to the polyphonic nature of the book – a mosaic of views, experiences, and analyses that form a coherent discourse on art, value, and cultural memory. In particularly strong passages, Melicherčík returns to his own dilemmas not only concerning building the collection but also regarding its fate after the collector's death – thus raising questions of inheritance, responsibility, and possible institutionalisation of collections. These more extroverted moments are especially impressive as the author does not relent in self-reflection.

In terms of theoretical grounding, the publication is not strictly academic but implicitly draws on concepts from cultural theory, aesthetics, museology, art anthropology, and the psychology of ownership. The case study on the transfer of Melichečík's Martin Benka's painting collection to the state museum documents the conflict between public interest, personal intention, and cultural institutions – which Melicherčík also interprets from the perspective of cultural policy and social discourse. Melicherčík also has experience with censorship of an exhibition of works from his collection and the subsequent premature termination of the exhibition (Prokeš & Michalková, 2018a, 2018b).

A dedicated section on the collection of African tribal art represents an important extension beyond the Eurocentric perspective on art and emphasises questions of authenticity, interpretive context, and cultural diversity. These parts of the publication strengthen its relevance for international discourse on art, identity, and cultural justice (Prokeš, 2014, 2015, 2017).

Stylistically, the book is vivid and intense – the language bears a strong personal stamp, combining expressive phrases, irony, and metaphors with analytical commentary. Sentences such as "Zberateľ je sebec a egoista" ("A collector is selfish and egotistic") function not only as provocation but as an entry into a deep ethical-psychological self-reflection on ownership and competition within the collecting community.

Although *V zajatí oka* can be read as a guidebook or personal chronicle, its greatest contribution lies in its ability to pose universal questions about value, transience, and permanence of cultural heritage. It is a text that appeals not only to the professional public in museology, art history, or cultural policy but also to a broad intellectual community

seeking a deeper meaning in the acts of collecting, preserving, and interpreting art. Thus, the book transcends personal testimony and becomes a stimulus for wider social reflection and dialogue.

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