AI for Good? Expanding Our Understanding of Opinion Leaders in A Changing Digital Landscape

Keynote at the 2024 North American Social Marketing Conference
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NORC at the University of Chicago

AI tools were used to create the images in this presentation.

Today, we find ourselves in one of the most challenging communication environments we have ever faced.

And the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) is exacerbating these issues.
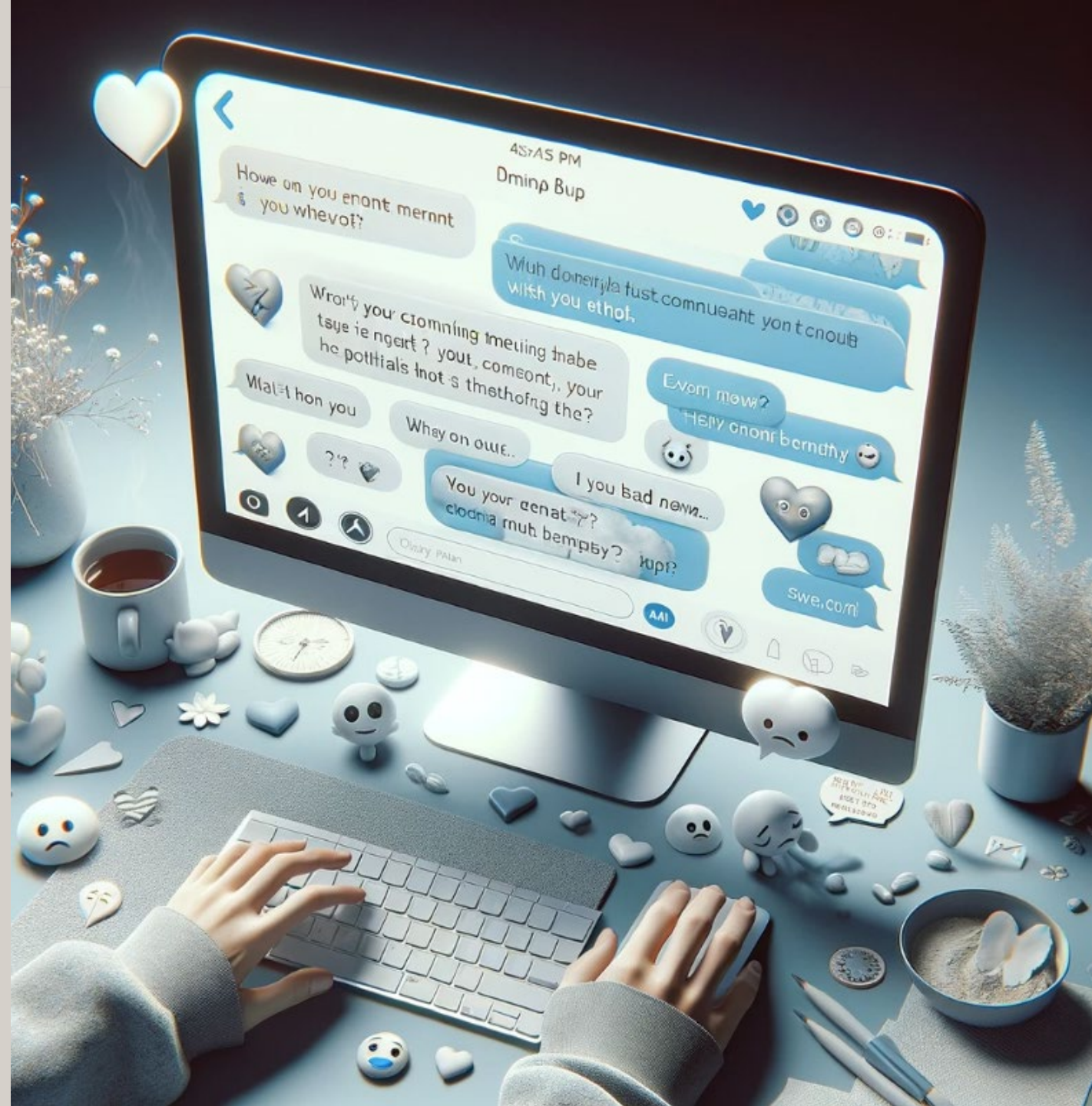
AI tools are enabling the broad sharing of inaccurate and potentially harmful information and being used to reinforce biases.

The fact is…

The communication tactics we currently use may not be the best suited to address people's questions and concerns about health issues in this environment.

They may not be personal enough or tailored enough to engage a diverse mix of people.

They are not always empathetic enough to communicate in a way that builds trust between communities and health systems.
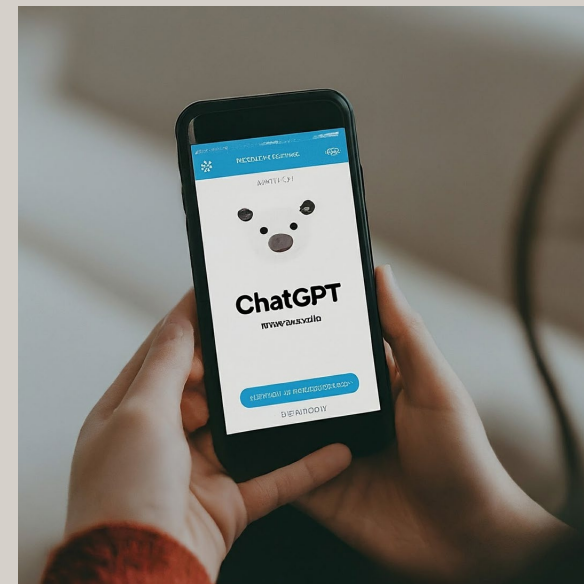
And they are unable to communicate health information at the scale needed to be effective.
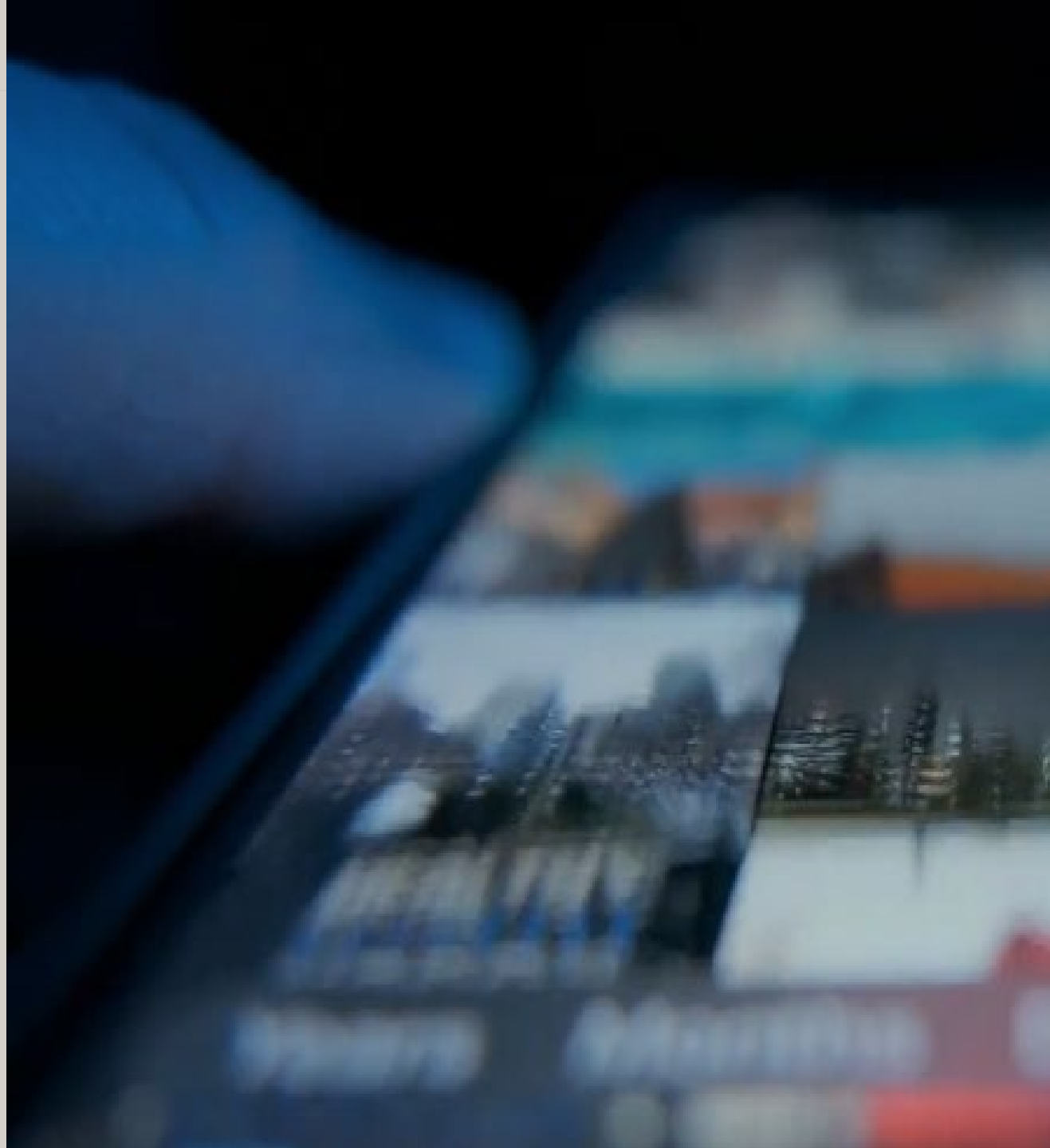
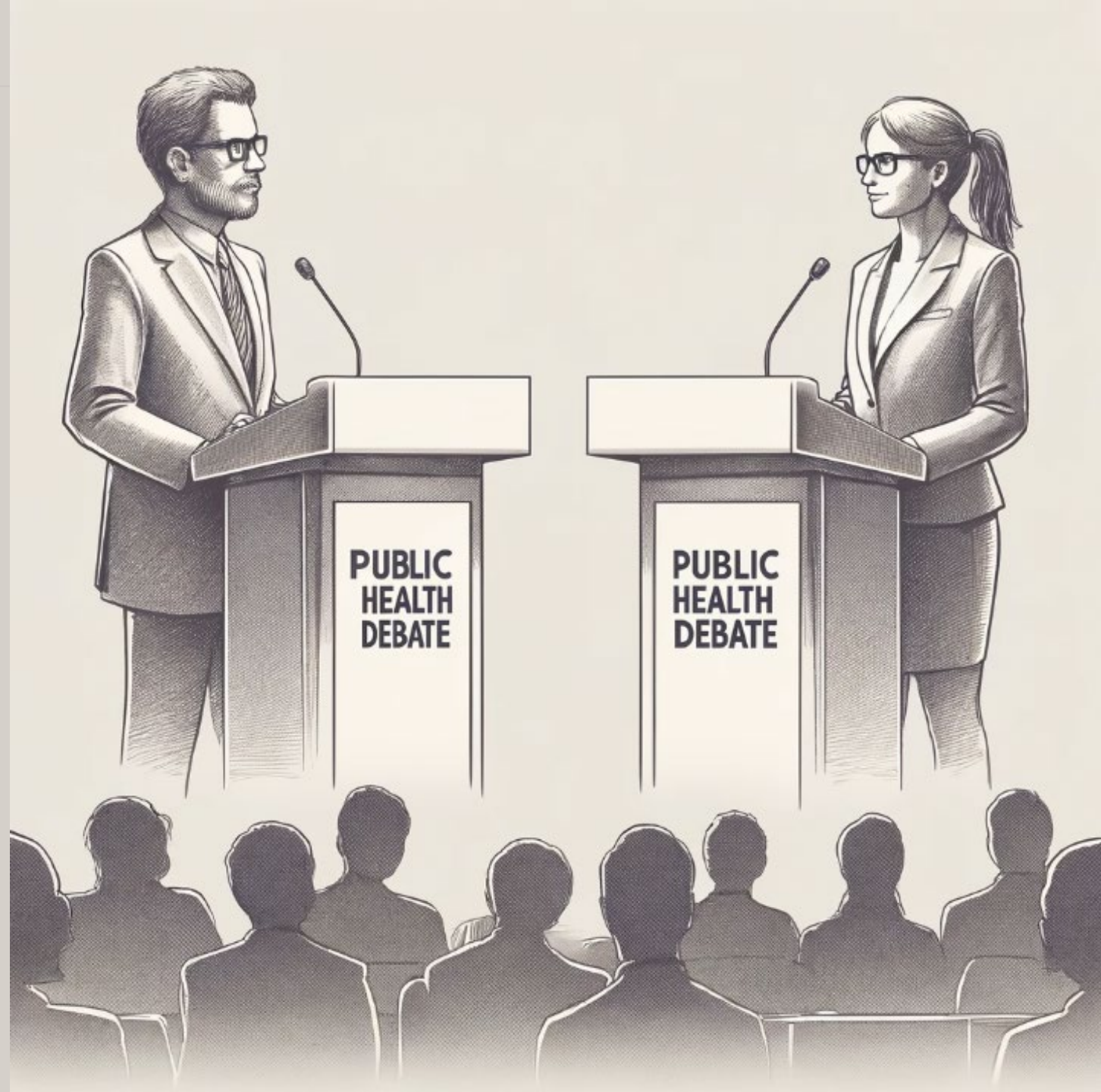# Understanding the Context for Individual Health Decision Making

Misinformation does not happen in a vacuum.

Public health authorities around the world are sometimes on opposing sides.

Even health care providers are sometimes on opposite ends of the spectrum.

What Do Individuals Want?

Individuals feel empowered to analyze information and determine veracity for themselves.

Shared decision making is increasingly the norm.

There is a tension between individual freedom and collective responsibility.

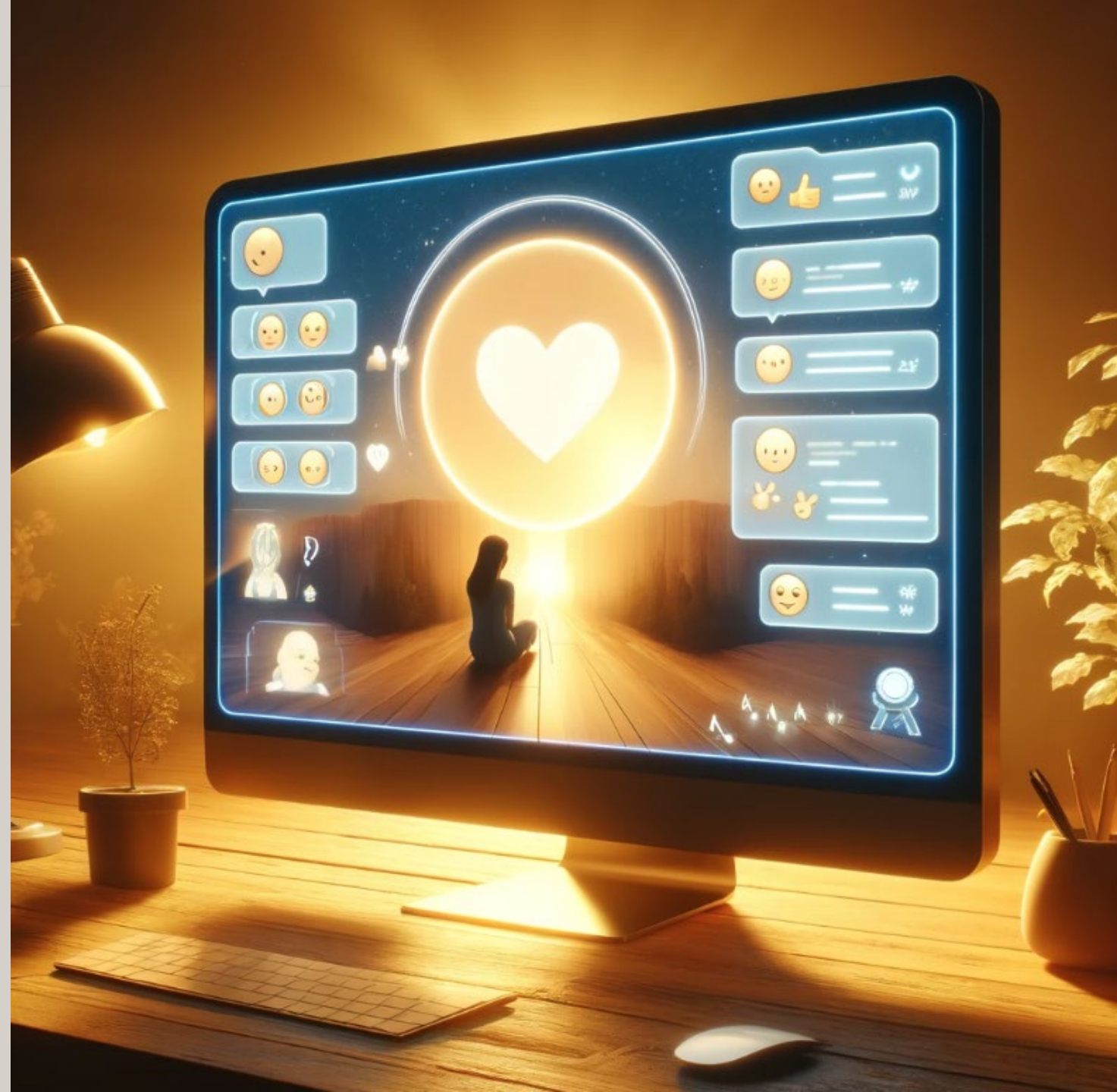# How do we begin to address these challenges?

To earn trust, prioritizing the person and the relationship has to be #1.

Health experts must be present in conversations with people – whenever and wherever they are happening.

And health communication must lead with empathy.
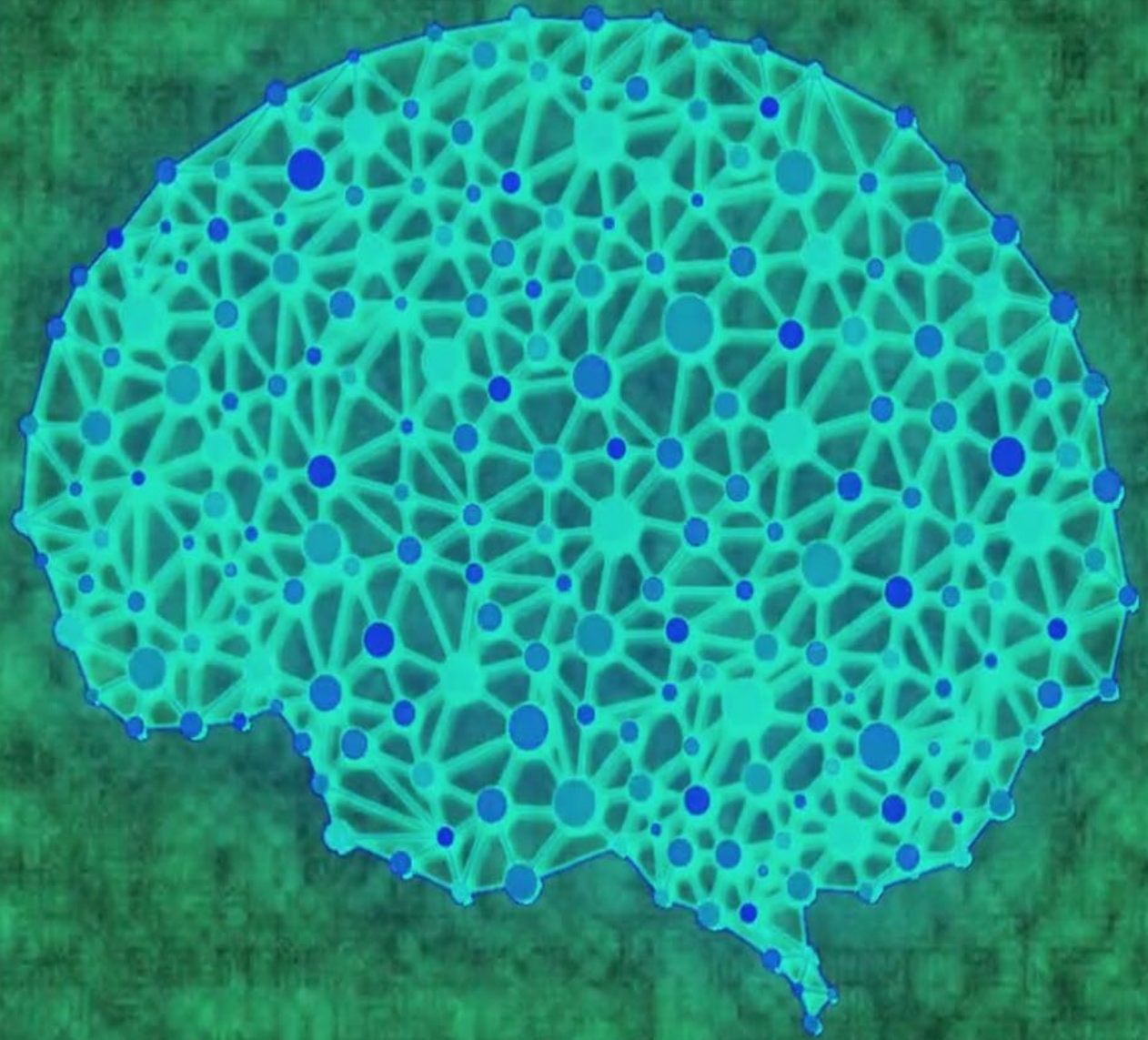
So Where Does AI Come In?

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We believe that generative AI can be a catalyst for positive transformation.

Because the same things that make AI risky can be used for good.
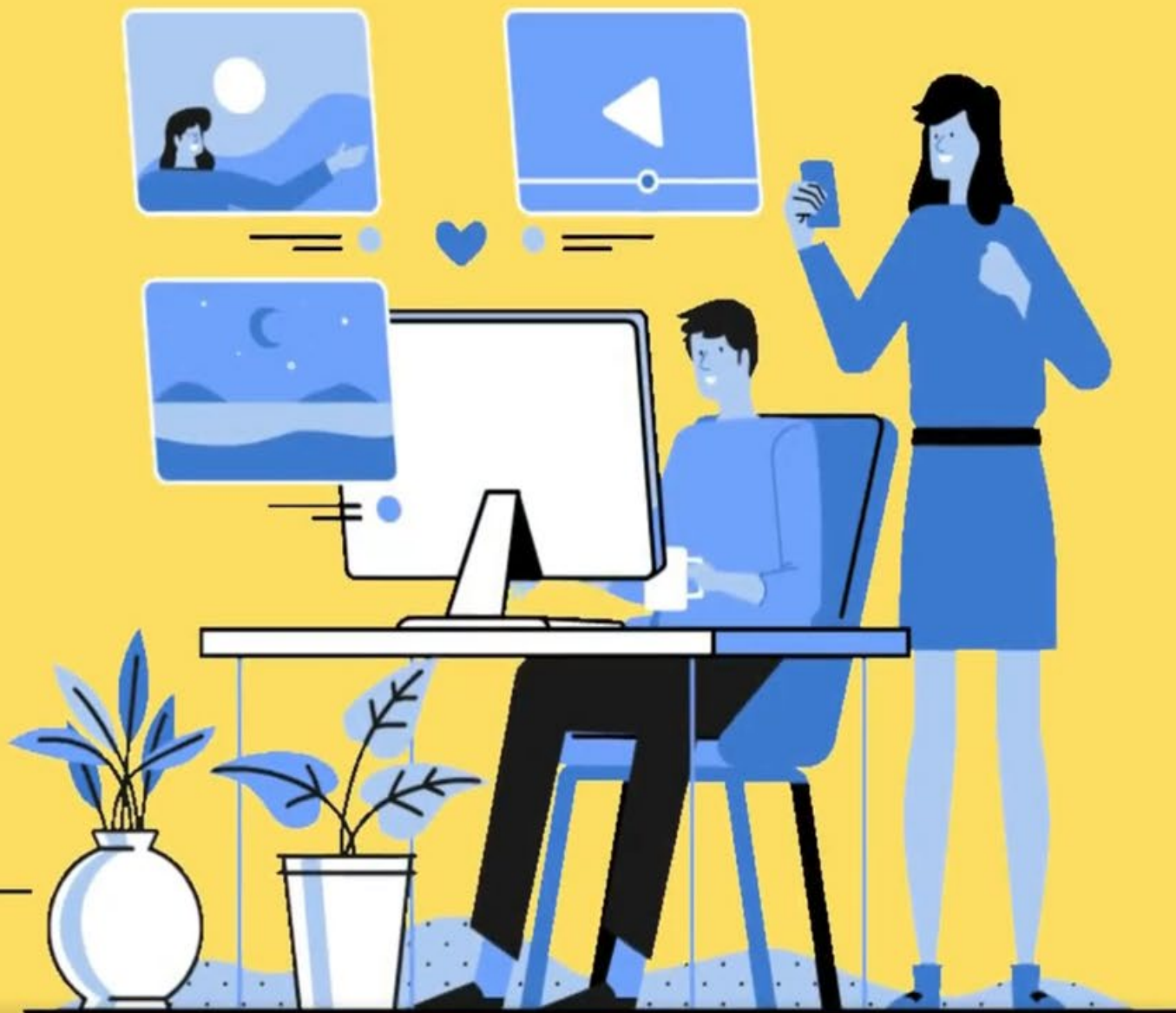
But this necessitates a re-imagining of how we do health communication.

Opinion Leadership & The Re-imagining of Health Communication

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The concept of opinion leadership first emerged in Roger's 1962 Diffusion of Innovations Theory.

Central to their role is the prima facie credibility they have with communities.

Contemporary research has explored how opinion leaders have shifted with the advent of social media.

Moreover, this is what people want.

Introducing "Health Communication AI" as the Next Form of Opinion Leader for the Digital Age

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Effectively addressing the AI-driven challenges of today's communication environment requires an equivalent solution – and that is AI itself.

Blending what we know about such digital opinion leadership with the power and scale of AI enables us to address the communication challenges we face today.

And foster authentic engagement, disseminate evidence-based information, and build trust with individuals like never before.
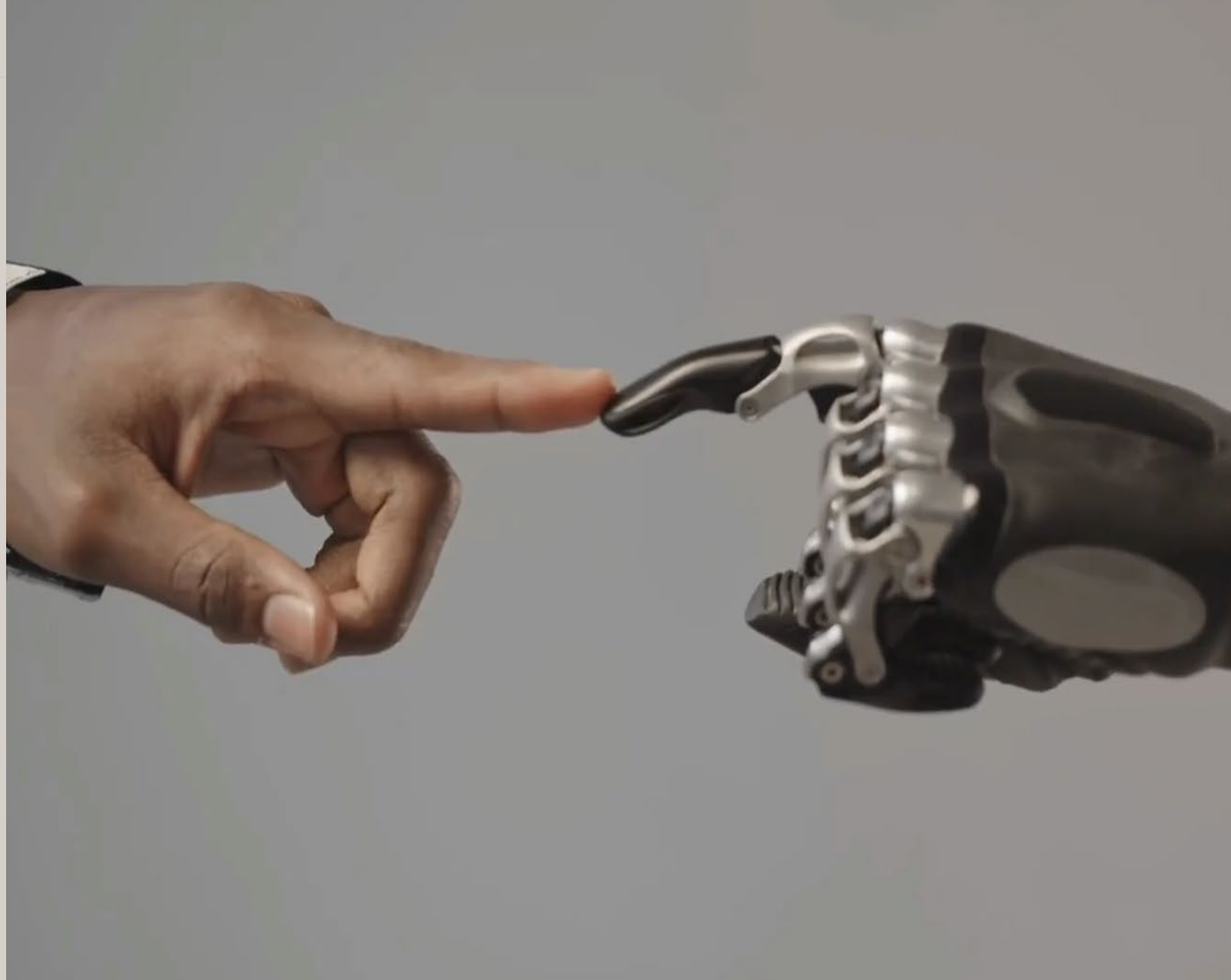
But Can AI Really Do This?

Research supports that individuals are drawn to empathetic AI responses and prefer them to human responses in some environments.

Some models have even been shown to surpass general human emotional awareness, scoring near maximum possible scores on Levels of Emotional Awareness Scales (LEAS) testing (Elyoseph et al., 2023).

Recent research at Google demonstrated that their LLM outperformed primary care physicians (Tu et al., 2024).
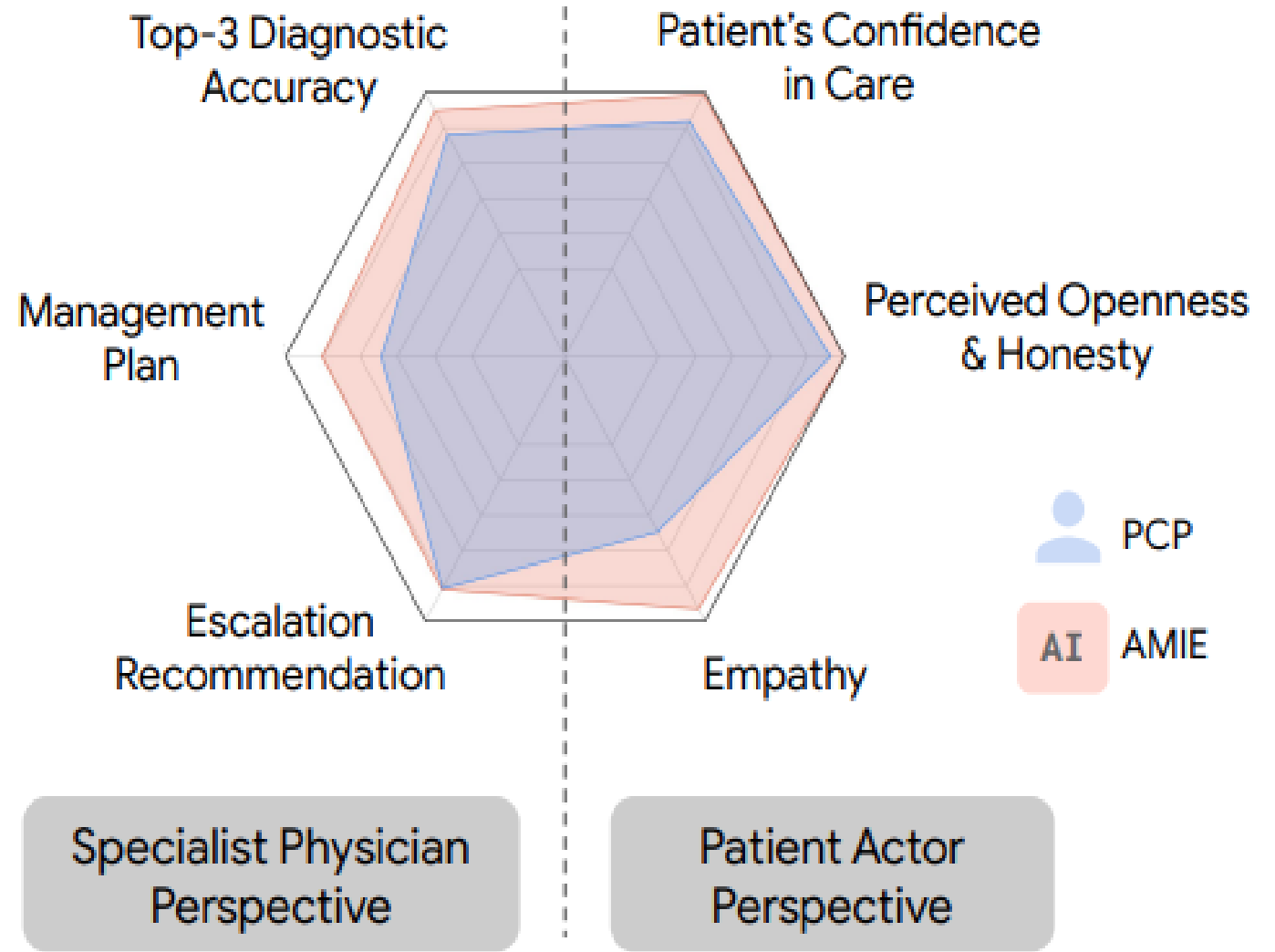
AMIE Outperforms PCPs on
Multiple Evaluation Axes for Diagnostic Dialogue

But How? Achieving the Vision of "Health Communication AI"

At its core, Health Communication AI is an Integrated AI system, functioning as an AI agent, that executes social listening, sentiment analysis, and provides text responses through a Chatbot in digital spaces.
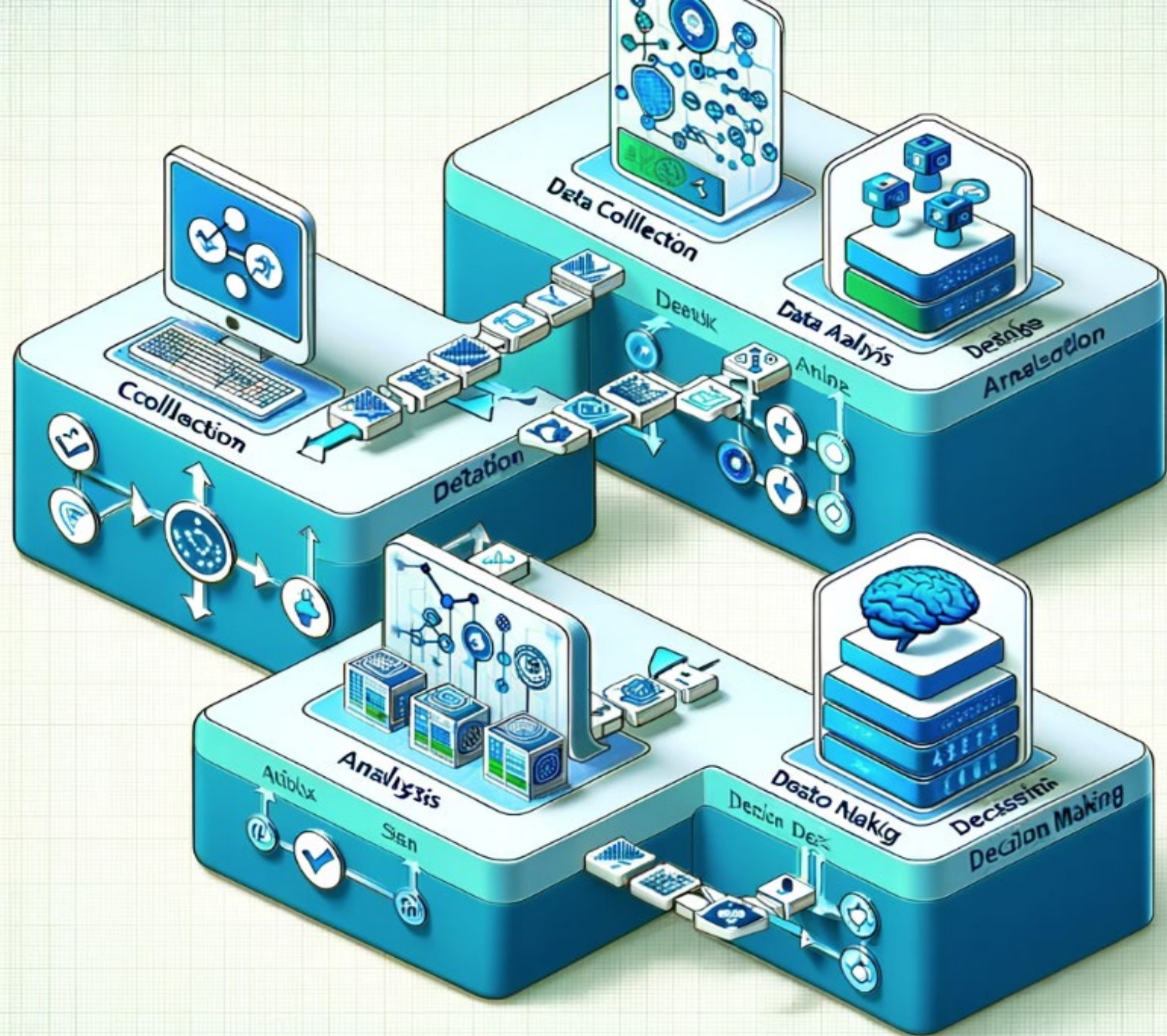
It is based on health communication best practices and is fine-tuned on up-to-date health and medical data.
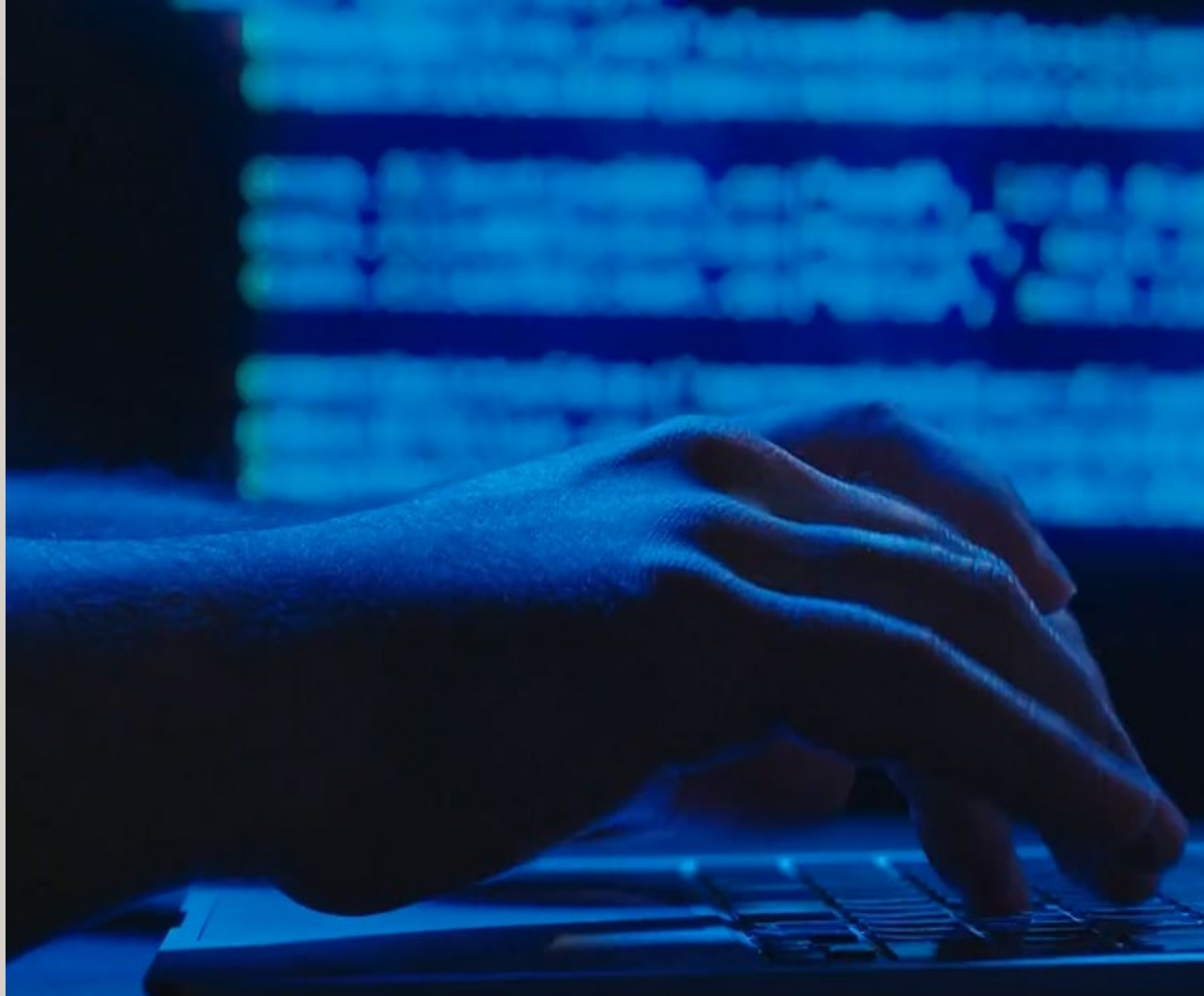
Our approach focuses heavily on meaningful data extraction, preparation, and annotation.

But Health Communication AI Is Bigger Than A Chatbot

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It is the beginning of a whole new scientific agenda.

One that brings together technology innovators AND public health and medical experts.

One that prioritizes community engagement and lived experiences.

One that considers how to apply the lessons we've learned from the advent of social media 20 years ago.

And one that considers ethical application and use as well as policy and regulatory implications.

Concluding Thoughts

The need for scalable, effective solutions to counter the challenges we face today has never been more pressing.

Our Idea, "Health Communication AI", was inspired by these challenges.

It draws on the best that health communication science has to offer and builds upon it by integrating generative AI technology.

And endeavors to address these challenges by delivering tailored, evidence-based, unbiased messages empathetically, thus fostering a deeper level of trust and engagement with communities.

Read More About Our Work

- Burke-Garcia, A. & Soskin Hicks, R. (in press). Scaling the Idea of Opinion Leadership to Address Health Misinformation: The Case for "Health Communication AI" in Journal of Health Communication.
- **NORC webpage**: https://www.norc.org/research/projects/health-communication-ai.html
- **Rapid Response in BMJ**: https://www.bmj.com/content/384/bmj.q69/rr
- **PLOS Your Say Blog Post**: https://yoursay.plos.org/2024/05/introducing-health-communication-ai-the-next-iteration-of-opinion-leader-for-the-age-of-artificial-intelligence/

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- https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/12/17/ai-fake-news-misinformation/

AI Tools Used to Create This Presentation

- Visla
- Adobe Firefly
- ChatGPT
- Dall-E

Thank you.

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