

# CAMmer in the Spotlight

## Dale Kunkel, PhD

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### Getting to know... Dale Kunkel

**What are you currently working on?** If anything distinguishes me as a scholar, it has been my efforts to apply research evidence to improve the media environment for children. Some of these have involved legislative battles in Congress, while others focused on rule-making and enforcement controversies at federal agencies such as the FCC and FTC. Along these lines, I am currently engaged in a major policy initiative led by two advocacy organizations, the [Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood](#), and the [Center for Digital Democracy](#), with pro bono legal support from the Institute for Public Representation at Georgetown University Law School. Earlier this year, these groups filed a legal complaint at the FTC accusing Google of engaging in unfair and deceptive advertising as part of its new YouTube Kids digital app. The app, which is targeted at 2-5 year olds, delivers short video programs that are viewed primarily on tablets and smartphones. Although labeled as safe for kids and family-friendly, YouTube Kids ignores long-standing policy protections enforced on children's television,

such as maintaining a clear separation between commercial and non-commercial content, and banning the use of program characters in advertisements. The app devotes entire channels to videos promoting toy products, such as LEGO, Barbie, and PlayDoh. Google promises parents that no food or beverage advertising is allowed; but they don't tell them that the app includes the McDonald's channel, which is filled with 'golden arches' product promotions. According to Google, such 'user-generated' content is not considered advertising. But Ronald McDonald is hardly your typical video uploader, and young children certainly cannot discriminate a traditional TV commercial from a YouTube video produced by McDonald's. The goal of our complaint is to establish a legal precedent that digital advertising to children must follow the same rules that apply to TV commercials. If a persuasive tactic is prohibited on a 19" TV screen, why would it be allowed just because a child is watching on a 6" iPad? The law is far behind in this area.



**What has been your most memorable project so far, and why?**

The National Television Violence Study (NTVS) was conducted from 1994-1998, and involved prominent scholars from four major universities (UCSB, North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin). It was arguably the largest social science project ongoing at the time, with support of over \$3 million funded entirely by industry. But the project was launched with an oversight board primarily comprised of academic leaders, and U.S. Senator Paul Simon carefully monitored its progress, so there was little threat of industry influence, which we never experienced. Our primary mission was to hold the television industry accountable for public promises to either reduce media violence, or present it in more responsible fashion that would reduce the risk of harmful effects on children.

The project allowed me to collaborate with an unbelievable list of academic stars, including Jane Brown, Joanne Cantor, Ed Donnerstein, Jim Potter, Ellen Wartella, and Barb Wilson, among many others. Current CAMmers who started as grad students on NTVS include Jay Bernhardt, Kristin Harrison, and Amy Nathanson. NTVS meetings consistently yielded the most interesting and rewarding research discussions I have ever experienced. Like me, some of these individuals are now retired, though I hope contemporary scholars still recognize their names, as their work has been tremendously influential. The project's annual

reports instantly became front-page news, with press conferences covered by C-SPAN and senior researchers interviewed by every TV network. My most memorable moment was leading the senior research team into the White House where we briefed Clinton administration staff on our findings before going public.

I believe that our content analysis work for NTVS was uniquely sensitive to the context of violent portrayals, a significant innovation at the time. And I believe most of the content patterns we identified in the 1990s still persist today; for example, most violence is sanitized and glamorized, and these contextual features increase the risk that children will behave more aggressively.

**Which achievement are you most proud of, and why?**

The achievements I am most proud of are successful policy outcomes, all of which have been accomplished by many people acting collectively, rather than my own personal actions. The passage of the Children's Television Act of 1990 (CTA) was a landmark victory for child advocates at the time. It required that each broadcaster must air educational programs for kids, and limited advertising during children's programs. Peggy Charren, founder of Action for Children's Television in 1969 and arguably the most quotable figure I have ever known (e.g., "They would never put the Helen Keller Story on kids TV if they didn't have a Helen Keller doll to sell."), deserves a ton of credit, along with

Kathy Montgomery and Jeffrey Chester, who headed their own Washington-based media advocacy organization for roughly a decade.

My involvement started in 1986, while serving as a Congressional Science Fellow in the House of Representatives. While a fellow, I helped draft the first version of the Children's Television Act, which was approved by Congress in 1987 but then vetoed by President Ronald Reagan. By that time, I had moved to an academic position at UC Santa Barbara, and subsequently testified at several Congressional hearings in the late 1980s that led to the enactment of an even stronger bill in 1990 that President George H.W. Bush allowed to become law. A few years later, I conducted studies that indicted broadcasters for not taking the Children's Television Act seriously. I analyzed station reports submitted to the FCC (prior to the Internet, one had to travel to Washington and sit for long days in the FCC Documents Room to accomplish such work) and found it was relatively common for shows such as "The Jetsons" to be labeled as educational, claiming they taught kids about new technologies. With pressure provided by child advocacy groups, that evidence led the FCC to adopt stronger rules to enforce the CTA.

There have been many other policy victories, some which are highly visible but made little difference – such as adoption of the V-chip TV ratings – and others that no one knows about but which really matter – such as a decision by the FCC in 2003 to tentatively conclude that interactive advertising to

children on TV is not in the public interest. That latter decision still remains an obstacle to "click-through" purchase technology in child-targeted ads on broadcast, cable, and satellite TV in the U.S.

**Vicky Rideout, the previous CAMmer, would like to know: Why have you felt it was so important to be personally involved in the policymaking process? How can younger scholars in the U.S. become involved in the policymaking community, and make sure their research is relevant to public policy?**

I had a unique situation early in my career. My Ph.D. advisor at Annenberg/USC was Dr. Aimee Dorr, a developmental psychologist from Stanford who had worked on the U.S. Surgeon General's TV violence report in 1972. During my graduate training circa 1980, Aimee was the chief scientific advisor to the FCC and FTC regarding two separate children and media regulatory proceedings, both of which were ongoing at exactly that time. My work with Aimee helped me to see how research findings could be used to advocate for government action of benefit to children. Once I started my career, I quickly learned that there were plenty of scholars doing important kids and media research, but almost no one was translating or brokering it to policymakers.

That is still the case today, and that vacuum remains a huge opportunity for a young scholar. The difficulty is that it requires one to essentially embrace two jobs – one is maintaining a legitimate presence in the research community, while the

other requires establishing close ties and credibility with key staffers working for interested Members of Congress and/or federal regulatory agencies such as the FCC or FTC. You have to become an ally, keeping in close touch with the policy agenda to anticipate how opportunities may emerge for research to inform government decision-making. The problem with the second job is that it doesn't help one gain tenure, and necessarily deprives researchers of time that could otherwise be spent on their studies. So it really boils down to a question of values, and priorities. If anyone is interested in pursuing such a path, please contact me as I would be excited to offer my help.



**What would be your work motto?** Plato recommends balance between physical activity and work of the mind. In his words, "The mere athlete is brutal and philistine, the mere intellectual unstable and spiritless. The right education must tune the

strings of the body and mind to perfect spiritual harmony." A regular morning workout fuels me with energy and clarity of mind for tackling my academic efforts. There is synergy from balancing both aspects of life, even if it involves no more than a simple walk.

**Which of your publications is your favorite, and why?** Wright, J., Kunkel, D., Pinon, M., & Huston, A. (1989). How children reacted to televised coverage of the space shuttle disaster. *Journal of Communication*, 39 (2), 27-45.

If I hadn't been "imprinted" with a policy orientation early in my career, I probably would have done studies like this on a much more regular basis. As a researcher, you respond to the media environment and try to provide insight about how media impact children, especially involving new trends or events that gain widespread attention. Here, my colleagues and I started planning this study within hours of the news, and gathered data just six days later, a rather extraordinary outcome primarily accomplished by the late John Wright. This study is my version of *The Road Less Traveled*, and will probably hold more historic value 50 years from now than anything else I have done. I still feel that the topic of news and current events coverage in children's lives receives inadequate attention.

**If you had unlimited resources, what kind of project would you want to do and why?**

I would devise a media intervention experiment

such that child subjects would see one pro-nutrition message (either an ad for a genuinely healthy food or a PSA promoting healthy eating) for every three unhealthy food commercials. The study would endure for a sustained period of time, after which I would measure subjects' perceptions about nutrition and healthy eating, and compare them to everyday children. I believe that consistent exposure during youth to advertising for obesogenic foods normalizes unhealthy products in a way that leads to poor lifelong eating habits. It would be nice to see if that pattern could be reversed.

I have been wrestling for a long time with a policy proposal that would require advertising during children's TV programs to maintain some sort of balance between obesogenic food ads, and healthy food ads or pro-healthy eating PSAs. The idea is based upon the same principle that was employed in the Fairness Doctrine in the 1960s regarding cigarette advertising. The advent of that policy led quickly to the demise of all televised tobacco commercials. Evidence from the study suggested above might be a catalyst to promote interest in a similar regulation to help ameliorate childhood obesity.

**If you had to give one piece of advice to young CAM scholars, what would it be?** Respect history. Read very old studies. More than a handful of times, I have seen young scholars suggest or even conduct a study that is similar to one that has

already been done, but they weren't aware of it because it was published long ago and hasn't been cited for many years. I just had this experience reading the last issue of JOCAM! (Sorry Amy and Dafna ☺) Science moves forward based on a convergence of evidence, but convergence is minimized when researchers are unaware of what came before them.

In 1986, I sat in the U of Kansas library and read an original copy of the Payne Fund studies from the 1930s that had not been touched since 1969, according to the due date stamped in the back of the volume. I never felt more scholarly! And I learned a lot more than I got from reading about the studies second-hand in mass communication textbooks. Same thing happened when I consulted the earliest published studies on children and advertising, which I found in volumes of POQ and Journal of Broadcasting from the early 1960s. Old studies can inspire and inform in innovative ways.

**Who would you like to put in the spotlight next, and why?** Dr. Sandra Calvert, Georgetown University. Sandy was a recent Ph.D. grad from U. of Kansas when I had the good fortune to serve as a post-doc there in the mid-1980s, working under her mentors Dr. Aletha Huston and Dr. John Wright. My question to her is: How did your mentors influence you? Are there specific things you do today, or particular projects you have tackled, that you can trace directly to their inspiration?