

# CAMmer in the Spotlight

## Patti M. Valkenburg, PhD

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### Getting to know... Patti Valkenburg

**What are you currently working on?** Together with a research team, including (future) CAM-officers Jess Piotrowski and Karin Fikkers, we are working on a four-year longitudinal study among parents and children, to investigate which children are particularly susceptible to positive media effects (learning, cognitive ability) and negative ones (aggression, ADHD-related behaviors).

I am also working on a review article entitled *Media effects: Eighty years of theory and research*. In the past years, I got more and more fascinated by the history of media effects. I have reread parts of the very first empirical study on the effects of audiovisual media on children and young adults, the *Payne Fund Studies*, which dates from 1933! It is a voluptuous set of 12 sub-studies into the effects of motion pictures on aggression, sexual arousal, sleep behavior, start of puberty, etc.

etc. One of its main conclusions is that children (and young adults) react quite differently or even opposite to the same movies, so that the effects of these movies on a large, heterogeneous audience can only be small. In textbooks, we always read that the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the era of powerful media effects. The *Payne Fund Studies* prove that this idea is inaccurate. It is amazing to learn how sophisticated these studies were, and how nuanced their conclusions. I would recommend all researchers interested in media effects to read these studies. Some of them are publicly available online through [Openlibrary.org](http://Openlibrary.org) ([Charters, 1933](#); [Dale, 1935](#); [Peterson & Thurstone, 1933](#)).

**What has been your most memorable project, and why?** My most favorite study is an observation study of infants' and toddlers' attention to television. We conducted it at the

end of the 1990s, at the time when Teletubbies became hugely popular in Europe and the US. It is by far my most instructive, valuable, and enjoyable study. We observed 60 babies and toddlers in their natural home environments. We were able to enfeeble many persistent stereotypes about young children and television. Children were, for example, far from passive while watching television. They sang, danced, verbally labeled objects, and often asked questions about the content to actively improve their understanding. We also found that even the youngest children were selective in their attention. The findings were a big eye-opener for me.



**Which achievement are you most proud of, and why?** Without doubt I am most proud of the division status of CAM. It took us several years to convince the board of ICA that the study of children, adolescents, and the media deserves its own home within ICA. Already in 2004, together with Barbara Wilson, I sent the then ICA president a request to form a division on children and the media. Three years later, I

tried it again. This time, we got the support of many seminal ICA members, most notably Joanne Cantor, Dafna Lemish, Ellen Wartella, Bradley Greenberg, Dan Anderson, Amy Jordan, and Alison Bryant. In 2008, the ICA board approved our amendment and we got the status of a Special Interest Group. Our first business meeting, which took place in Montreal in 2008 was an amazing experience. ICA had planned for a small room, 25 persons max. But

on the first day of the conference, it already became clear that the room was way too small. Over 120 people showed up, and we needed to move to the hallway of the hotel to celebrate our

victory. Within two years, CAM had enough members to become a full-blown ICA division.

**What would be your work motto?** I believe in the power of collaborative research, and preferably work with heterogeneous teams, in terms of disciplinary background, age and gender. We study one of the most dynamic objects of research, which changes continuously, often even before our data get published. If there is one field in which we

easily experience blank and blind spots it is ours. We need each other to avoid or minimize such spots.

**Which of your publications is your favorite, and why?** My most favorite publication is our theoretical article "The Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model", coauthored with Jochen Peter (*Journal of Communication*, 2013). That article was one of the most challenging articles I ever wrote. I still look back with pleasure to my heated debates with Jochen, for example about the role of response states in the media-effects process. Are they a mediator in the relationship between media use and outcomes, a moderator, or both? Some steps in the media-effects process are still a mystery...

**If you had unlimited resources, what kind of project would you want to do and why?** I would hire a professional research manager, and I set up two cohort studies, one including toddlers and the other preadolescents. And I would follow these groups for at least ten years. We would combine home observations, survey measures, and experimental tests. The aim would be to investigate the orchid-dandelion hypothesis and adjust this hypothesis to the study of media effects. The orchid-dandelion hypothesis states that most children are like dandelions: They thrive well in both positive

and negative environments. A small majority of children are more like orchids: They are more susceptible to environmental influences than the dandelions, and if they lack a supportive environment, they wilt. I am very eager to know whether the children who are particularly susceptible to negative media effects are also the ones who are particularly susceptible to positive effects.

**If you had to give one piece of advice to young CAM scholars, what would it be?** Over the time I've learned that the best research is research that has been set up, developed, and written up in collaboration with other researchers. Learning to write academic articles is a life-long process of gradual improvement. If you get the chance to find an experienced mentor early in your career, grab it. Such a mentor can be crucial for the rest of your career.

**Who would you like to put in the spotlight next, and why?** I would like hand over the baton to Dafna Lemish. In 1987, she wrote about one of the best qualitative studies I know of. It is entitled "Viewing in Diapers" and I still cite her piece very often. She is also the founding editor of JOCAM, the first journal entirely devoted to the study of children, adolescents, and the media. She is a pioneer, and very important to our field.