

CAMmer in the Spotlight

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Getting to know... Vicky Rideout

What are you currently working on? I have three projects underway right now. First up is a big study for Common Sense Media trying to document media usage among tweens and teens. In this study we are simply trying to measure and report how much time tweens and teens spend in the key media activities (including reading, listening to music, using social media, playing video games, browsing the Internet, watching TV, and so on), and which devices they use for those activities (for example, how much TV/video viewing occurs on a TV set, laptop, tablet, or smartphone?). This is a massive data set. The second project is a survey for the Joan Ganz Cooney Center and Rutgers University on low- and moderate-income families' experiences with digital technologies. The purpose of this project is to take a close look at the quality of access among families of modest means, and at the types of reciprocal learning that occur in these families. And the third project is with scholars at Arizona State and George Mason; it is a set of focus groups and a national survey of African-

American teens and their parents, designed to explore attitudes and behaviors regarding informal learning with digital technology. In all cases, my role is to help my clients hone their strategic goals for the research project, choose an appropriate methodology, and develop the research instrument. Then I oversee data analysis, develop the key findings, and write a public report. Often I also help clients organize an event at which the findings can be released and the implications discussed among a group of key stakeholders.

What has been your most memorable project so far, and why? That would have to be the Generation M studies I directed for the Kaiser Family Foundation. Starting in 1999, every five years we did a large national survey and media-use-diary among 8- to 18-year-olds, documenting the time spent in various media activities. It was such a privilege to have the resources to undertake a decade-long project like this (we replicated it in 1999, 2004, and 2009). It was a revolutionary time



in terms of youth media, with the advent of Google, social media, mobile devices, and touch screens, to name just a few. I feel as though even 50 or 100 years from now, those data may be useful to media historians. I know I certainly would have loved to have something similar to have looked back on from 50 years ago!

But I have to admit that my two most memorable professional “moments” haven’t involved my work on children and media at all. Before I started working on these issues, I was a political consultant and speechwriter. A couple of years out of college, I got a job as a speechwriter for the first woman to run for vice president, Geraldine Ferraro. My second day on the job, I was watching the network news on TV when they played a clip of her saying lines I had written the day before - and then they showed Vice President George Bush responding to what she had said. I was so excited I thought my head was going to explode. And then in 2004, I was the director of speechwriting for the Democratic Convention, when a little-known state senator from Illinois was our keynote speaker (Barack Obama). We had spent quite a while editing, finalizing, and practicing his remarks, but I really wasn’t sure how it was going to go, and I was nervous. I stood in the shadows on the stage as he spoke, and by the time the speech was over, I knew I had just witnessed history. Sometimes we forget how amazing it is that a Black man was elected President of the United States. At

that moment, standing on that stage, I first realized that it might just be possible.

Which achievement are you most proud of, and why? I love starting initiatives – developing the strategic plan for a new project or organization and then implementing it. So I was thrilled when the Kaiser Family Foundation asked me in the late 90s to launch a new program area for them on media, children, and health. I developed a three-pronged approach: creating our own media campaigns on safer sex; working with folks in the entertainment industry (such as the TV show *Grey’s Anatomy*) to embed health-related content into programming already on the air; and conducting research (on children and media, and on health communication).

I suppose there are two parts of that work that I am most proud of. One is the media campaigns on safer sex we created with MTV and BET (*It’s Your (Sex) Life* and *Rap It Up*). Our concept was for those messages to be everywhere, and for them not to look “branded.” We had content in show promos, PSAs, websites, news segments, documentaries, live call-in shows, and reality shows. We leveraged tens of millions of dollars in safer sex messaging, and all of it was really well aimed at our target audience. In so many focus groups I’ve done over the years, I’ve heard teens bring up those campaigns, unprompted. We were creating a new form for public service messaging, and it was fun to innovate with such wonderful

creative partners.

And the second part of that program I am proud of is the fact that we were able to pump so much funding into research on kids and media. We worked with legends in the ICA/CAM community such as Ellen Wartella, Dale Kunkel, Don Roberts, and Walter Gantz, among many others. We undertook a series of content analyses about sexual content on television, and another about PSAs on TV; we did surveys and diary studies about media usage among children of all ages; and content studies of food advertising on television and on the Internet. For more than a decade I was privileged to support the work of some of the finest scholars in the field.

danah boyd, the previous CAMmer, would like to know: What have been the joys and frustrations of running your own research consultancy?

No question that the biggest joy is being able to go to work every day in sweats. Now that I'm the boss, I've set the sartorial bar very low.

Seriously, I'd have to say it's been 98% joy and 2% frustration. Virtually every project I've worked on has been something I considered meaningful and important – a study with the Cooney Center about use of media for informal learning, another with Ellen Wartella on teens' use of the Internet, mobile apps, and

digital games for health information and promotion, and another with Common Sense Media tracking digital media use among infants and toddlers. It's also nice to be able to branch out a little into some slightly different topic areas. For example, recently I've been helping some folks with a proposal to evaluate climate-change media, and for the past few years I was the consultant for a fantastic media campaign on domestic violence and sexual assault (NO MORE), whose PSA we got placed for free in the Super Bowl this past year.

I guess the main challenge has been deciding how "big" I want to be, and then sticking to that vision. There is a bit of an expectation that if you start your own consultancy, you should want to build it up as much as possible; but I actually have no desire to grow a large consulting firm. I like being hands-on in the research process, but that means I can only do a few projects at a time. So I've had to turn down various projects I would have loved to do, because of limitations on my time. I guess another frustration comes from the inevitable compromises one has to make in the research process, due to budgetary limitations. This isn't due to being an

independent consultant, but is a broader challenge in our field. I primarily do national quantitative research; and these days, we're at a transition point where there really aren't terrific methodologies for doing that type of research



any more. Random-digit-dial telephone surveys are hugely expensive and totally impractical if you're interested in a hard-to-reach population such as low-SES youth, or African American teens; and online panels are often unrepresentative, over-used, or both. So sometimes we're choosing the "least worst" methodology, and until the survey research world gets through this transition period, that's probably not going to change.

What would be your work motto? I recently heard the marine biologist Sylvia Earle define the scientific process in a very simple way that resonated with me: "Observe carefully and report honestly." I hope that's what my approach to research has been. I think the most challenging part, for me, is to "observe carefully." How do I know if I have looked deeply enough at what is going on? Am I seeing the true story underlying the data I've collected? For example, I may observe a small increase in the use of digital media among young children, but what if what's actually happening is a huge increase among certain types of children, and no change at all among most others? Did I look carefully enough to observe that?

Which of your publications is your favorite, and why? One of my favorites is a [paper](#) I co-authored with Elizabeth Moore in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* back in 2007, in which we inventoried and quantified the elements in food company web-

sites aimed at children, and then outlined the policy implications that were raised by the presence of those interactive elements in online advertising to children. We were able to document the use of viral marketing in children's websites, the use of premiums and gifts, the incorporation of TV ads in websites (and the types of incentives used to entice children to watch the ads repeatedly), and the enormous variety of branded content kids were encouraged to engage with. I think many of the policy questions raised in the paper are still relevant today.

I'm also quite happy with the report I recently co-authored with Ellen Wartella, called *Teens, Health, & Technology*. I like it because I think putting a spotlight on how teens are using online and mobile resources for health information is incredibly important; and because the combination of quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus group) research we did allowed us to document national trends while also telling some pretty moving individual stories about how teens are empowering themselves with information, often in challenging circumstances.

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

I think I would like to use what I've learned about health communication, public interest marketing, and youth media practices to create media-based anti-smoking and anti-vaping campaigns for youth.

PSAs can work, just as ads can work. But they rarely get the chance to. PSA campaigns never have even close to the investment behind them that ad campaigns have – an investment that’s needed for formative and evaluative research, for production, and for buying placement in front of your target audience. So I would find it very satisfying, if I had unlimited resources, to try to create a smart, effective, ongoing campaign to counter the extensive and insidious marketing of nicotine-related products to youth.

And since I have unlimited resources, I’ll add one more: I’ve always thought the ultimate longitudinal media study would be to create an alternate universe in which every piece of media children encounter reflects gender equality. Then we’d randomly assign children to grow up in either the current universe or the experimental “gender-equal” universe; and in a couple of generations we’d do a study and see how all the kids – and the universes – turned out.

If you had to give one piece of advice to young CAM scholars, what would it be? Try to bring an open mind to every piece of research you do and every data set you analyze.

Who would you like to put in the spotlight next, and why? I’d like to nominate Dale Kunkel. His research has been in the middle of so many important policy debates here in the U.S., whether

it’s media violence, sexual content in the media, educational TV, advertising to children, or obesity. His research is always newsworthy and policy-relevant, and he’s trained so many of the scholars in our field now, that I think his influence has been enormous. I’d like to ask him: 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?