

CAMmer in the Spotlight

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Getting to know... Ellen Wartella

What are you currently working on? My research is at the nexus of public policy questions, media and technology, and children's development. Three of my current projects are illustrative of this and all are funded by the National Science Foundation. First, in my lab we are conducting a content analysis of food marketing to children in which we are examining whether the 17 companies in the CFBAI (Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative) are holding to their pledges of only marketing their healthier food products to children in all marketing venues (in store, online, on television). We examined their food marketing in 2013, the year before the pledge went into effect in January 2014, and now we are examining their marketing in 2015.

Second, we are in the second year of a five year grant to examine young preschool and early elementary school children's interest in

STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) education and concepts. We have conducted interviews with the parents of young children to ask about their children's interest in STEM, the parents' interest in and sense of competency with STEM content, and their practices for engaging their children in STEM pursuits. Also, we are conducting content analyses of the STEM content in preschool children's programs and educational online sites. Both of these studies are collaborations with Sandy Calvert at Georgetown; and the STEM project includes as our third colleague Rebekah Rickert of the University of California-Riverside.

A third project relating to STEM education is a collaboration with colleagues here at Northwestern, Anne Marie Piper of Communication Studies and Ed Colgate of the McCormick School of Engineering, in which we



are studying a new haptic interface for iPads and smartphones as a technology which might enable elementary school children's learning about science.

What has been your most memorable project so far, and why? For sheer scope and policy impact, I believe that the National TV Violence Project of 1994-1998 which I worked on in

collaboration with colleagues at UC Santa Barbara, Wisconsin, and North Carolina, as well as the University of Texas where I was on faculty at the time. The study was requested by the US Congress and funded by the National Cable TV Association. It



was intended to monitor how violence was portrayed across the landscape of all cable TV and to encourage methods to reduce TV violence. It was the largest content analysis of TV ever conducted (examining over 10,000 television shows over three years).

Which achievement are you most proud of, and why? I have been fortunate to be involved with

a number of policy-related research activities at a national level through the National Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Medicine (IOM): in the mid-2000s I was on the Board on Children, Youth and Families that commissioned the foundational study on Food Marketing to Children and Youth (I was on that study committee too) that noted how food marketing has been contributing to the

childhood obesity crisis in this country. Subsequently, I chaired the IOM committee recommending front of pack nutritional information for all packaged foods in this country (2011 report) and which is still being reviewed at the Food and Drug Administration, and

I served on the IOM committee Advancing Progress on Obesity Prevention (2013). In all cases I found these experiences fascinating and met remarkable researchers from various other fields, including nutrition science, education, psychology, medicine. Also, I participated in public hearings on childhood obesity and was one of the committee members to conduct Congressional briefings.

These sorts of experiences demonstrate the power of good research to influence public discussion and policy on important and substantive public issues affecting children's lives. I was pleased to represent communication studies at many of these study groups.

Sandy Calvert, the previous CAMmer, would like to know: What would you like your legacy to be in the field of children and media?

I would hope that research that pointedly addresses public questions about media and technology's role in children health and welfare stays on the research agenda of future scholars in our area. This interdisciplinary perspective of media studies and child development has been an agenda item of concern in our society since the advent of mass newspapers in the 19th century and was accelerated in the 20th century with film, radio, and TV development. It is still of concern with all of the technology available to even babies today.

What would be your work motto?

We can do that, can't we?

Which of your publications is your favorite, and why? That's a hard one to answer, but probably the first history piece that I did with Byron Reeves from 1985: "Historical Trends in Research on Children and the media: 1900-1960". It is the project that gave an understanding of the importance of public concerns about media's influence on children.

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

A longitudinal study following a group of children from birth through adolescence studying their media use and various developmental outcomes... in short, to do what was proposed in the National Children's Study that never did get off the ground.

If you had to give one piece of advice to young CAM scholars, what would it be? Follow your passion!

Who would you like to put in the spotlight next, and why? I would like to nominate Alison Bryant, and my question for her is: What would you say are the advantages of working outside of the academy?