

# CAMmer in the Spotlight

## Jan van den Bulck, PhD

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### Getting to know... Jan van den Bulck

**What are you currently working on?** I am working on a number of exciting projects with some very bright grad students, and there are a couple of theoretical ideas I have been toying with for years. But there is one pet project that I enjoy struggling with, even though I am not sure I know how to make heads or tails of it. I suppose I'd have to describe it as an unintended field study. Last year I spent a semester on sabbatical in the Midwest, with my wife and children. From day one it was clear that my kids, who were 11 and 13, were comparing the reality of living in the US with the images they had in their heads from watching American TV shows. Their reactions were intriguing. On one level some sort of instinctive media literacy had led them to assume that recurring clichés from TV were just that: TV clichés. So when they discovered that the real school-bus looked exactly like the yellow school-buses of American TV, they were surprised, even a little shocked. On another level, however, there were many instances when it was evident that they felt they had learned something about the real

world. This sort of unintentional learning from fiction has fascinated me since I was an undergraduate. I've called it "data-setting", because I feel it mirrors the "agenda-setting" effect of non-fiction. Anyway, I've been reading up on the concept of auto-ethnography to see whether I can't write up my kids' observations (and some of my own) in a paper. I have no idea where this might lead and as someone who has spent most of his career working on quantitative, survey-based studies I am more than a little lost. For an academic I think that is a healthy place to be.

**What has been your most memorable project so far, and why?** In 2002 I received a government grant to study media effects on health. I put in as many variables as I could on food, snacking, weight, alcohol use, smoking, sleep, and more. I looked at opinions, perceptions, and attitudes, but also behaviors, something I think we tend to ignore in media effects research. Many schools cooperated, and we were able to return to the same

adolescents for two follow-up studies. It really jump-started my research on health topics, and several master and PhD-students were able to publish articles off of it, too. We ended up with papers in a variety of fields: ergonomics, emergency medicine, addiction, sleep and so much more. I'd christened it the SOMAH project, for "study on media and adolescent health", but indoors we referred to it as the "Vogels"-study, after the name of the minister who had provided the grant. Because "Vogels" is a literal translation of "Birds", that must have confused a lot of people...

**Which achievement are you most proud of, and why?** Belgium has one of the worst records for suicide. A number of years ago the government wanted health officials, journalists, and psychiatrists to look at the potential imitation effects of sensational suicide reporting. I was brought in because of the "media and health" angle. The journalists didn't like the idea of the government telling them what and how to write about suicide and the psychiatrists had a hard time understanding how news becomes news. In the end, I think I managed to help people see each other's point of view. I then wrote evidence-based guidelines [in Dutch] for suicide reporting. They were sent to all Flemish journalists. My text was later translated into French and sent to all the French-speaking journalists in Belgium as well. I don't know whether we made much of a difference, but ever since many

news outlets end a suicide story with a phone number and a little sentence advising people in trouble to call that helpline. I think I used everything I ever learned about communication in this project: evidence-based science, science communication, negotiation, and even my experience working in the media earlier in my career.

**Our previous CAMmer, Kris Harrison, would like to know: How does your work inform our understanding of the role of media in structuring children's lives on a day-to-day basis?** I think even we underestimate how omnipresent the media are in kids' lives. It was tough enough for earlier generations to escape the allure of TV or video games and go to bed. Kids now have streaming video that gives them less than 20 seconds to act if they don't want to be sucked into the next episode of a show that just presented them with a season's finale worth of cliffhangers. And they are probably watching that on a tablet computer in their bed. Telling parents kids should have less than two hours of exposure, as the AAP does, or should stop using the media two hours



before going to bed, as the sleep community sometimes does, is, frankly, utterly detached from reality. What is the average parent to do with that advice? The media are with our kids all day long, like an invisible friend. We are expecting them to make a distinction between bad use of their devices, when they are vilified for interfering with schoolwork or sleep or physical activity, and good use, when we expect them to use the same media for school, for monitoring physical activity, or for being well informed, responsible young citizens. And what we understand least of all is that it is communal behavior. It is as if kids have a whole array of cork boards around their bed: when they open their eyes in the morning (if they wait that long), they start scanning the messages that their circle of friends and frenemies have left on a staggering number of digital noticeboards. They probably haven't even gotten out of bed at that point. I think that that is the real issue today: not the omnipresent appeal of extremely gratifying distraction, but the addition of interaction. You are not just keeping yourself awake, or distracted from homework, or unaware of how much you've been eating, it is your friends. If you want to understand what this means, give your Smartphone to a kid for a couple of minutes. Imaginary digital farms will start "pinging" you to harvest crops at all hours of the night.

**What is an important question from parents and practitioners that we as academics cannot provide a good answer to yet?** One answer to that question became painfully obvious the morning of the very recent terror attacks in Brussels. The "breaking news" format was saturating all media with constant replays of horrible images, the social media were full of angry voices, my kids sent me text-messages because their friends at school were scared to death by text messages they had received from their own parents and, later, my kids would quote their favorite YouTube-stars to me. At some point during the day I looked up available advice for parents, with the intention to Tweet about it. We know so much about framing, and news, and violence, and fear effects, but all I managed to find were platitudes such as: "talk to your children", "be aware of their feelings", some advised not to show fear, others felt you ought to share your own fears with them. The worst advice was "tell them it can't happen here". We live really close to Brussels and we've all used that metro and that airport – what kind of advice is that? I may have Tweeted these types of suggestions myself after earlier attacks, when all of this was about other places and other people, but all of a sudden it was an important question for me. I think that as a collective we should do a better job of thinking long and hard about the meaning and the implications of our research for people's daily lives.

**What would be your work motto?** Never stop learning, never stop changing. One day your clever ideas of today will either be outdated or so commonly held that they have become trivial. So keep questioning beliefs, keep looking for new challenges. This doesn't only apply to research. I have started to realize that many of my firmest beliefs are based on my experiences as an undergraduate and graduate student. Both universities and people have changed. There is a serious risk of advocating solutions to problems that no longer exist. I suppose that Bruce Lee's old motto about kungfu applies to academia as well: be like water! Change constantly, find a way around every obstacle, and find your flow!

**Which of your publications is your favorite, and why?** That's a difficult one. I am the sort of person who shudders when he rereads his own stuff. All I see is what I could have done better. There is, however, one publication that has taught me a lot. About 15 years ago I overheard a woman complaining about her young son, who was kept up at night by his cell phone. People thought that idea was hilarious. Adults hardly used their cell phones, so what was a kid going to use it for? I included a couple of questions about cell phone use after "lights out" in the "Vogels" study and wrote a one-page "letter to the editor" for the Journal of Sleep Research with preliminary results. I received media attention from all over the world with this and it led

to a couple of follow-up publications that people are still quoting. It is the only time I made the social science equivalent of a "discovery". It has taught me to listen to people when they talk about media. That's an excellent way to get new ideas.

**If you had unlimited resources, what kind of project would you want to do and why?** Money isn't the only resource a researcher may want. Whenever I read about something like the CSI-effect, I keep thinking: what if we had known in advance that a whole new type of content would become popular? I could have set up a large pre-test, followed by a longitudinal study of viewers and non-viewers, with regular measurements of perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors, for as long as possible. It wouldn't only require money and fast-working academics; it would also require a kind of access to the entertainment industry that I don't think effects researchers usually have.

**If you had to give one piece of advice to young CAM scholars, what would it be?** When I go to conferences, it often strikes me how many people appear to be doing the same thing. The pressure to be productive has made us too acutely aware of what seems to be fashionable at any given time. Academia is like politics: you don't get successful by trying to be a copy of someone else. Find your niche instead! Don't worry too much about what's fashionable. Trust me: three years from now, all

those people will be running after another passing fancy. Academic fads are like diets - they come and go at an alarming rate and rarely deliver what they promise. To find your niche, follow your passion. What fascinates you? Sometimes young people tell me they are worried that their topic is boring, or outdated, or too far-fetched and that nobody else seems to be working on it. Perfect! That's when you have an opportunity to make a difference. And, yes, reviewer n° 2 may say exactly that: that your idea is outdated, or too weird, or counter-intuitive, but that reviewer would have had some choice words for you, too, if you had been the 15th person in a row to submit a manuscript about the same "hot" issue that month. Follow your passion, be different, stay the course.

**Who would you like to put in the spotlight next, and why?** I would like to nominate Moniek Buijzen of Nijmegen University in the Netherlands, and I would be very interested to hear about her view on the "positive communication science paradigm" that she advocates on her website. What is it? Does it require us to change our theories, our methods, our attitude towards our research or what we do with our results?