

**ParticipACTION:¹ How “Video Killed the Radio Star”².
The Rise and Fall of Health Promotion in Canada, 1971-2001.**

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In 1988, a young athletic couple were trying to launch their careers as a physical fitness spokesperson team. They created a ‘demo video’ that consumed most of their saving, \$4,000, but could not find an American or Canadian media agency willing to produce their idea.³ The reasons were simple. Hal Johnson and JoAnne McLeod were an interracial couple and JoAnne had chosen to keep her maiden name. They were simply too big a risk to promote. Having exhausted the traditional media avenues, they approached ParticipACTION and then-President Russ Kisby. Interracial marriage, feminist statement – these issues did not concern Kisby. The real worry was that Johnson and McLeod were far too serious and “heavy”⁴ in their physical fitness instruction. In a 2003 interview Kisby noted, “Our style is to be a little more entertaining... to candy-coat the message”.⁵ This was where the tweaking of ‘Body Break’ needed to take place, not in its casting or risk management. This vignette speaks to the underlying values that imbued ParticipACTION and resulted in its continued cultural legitimacy with the majority of Canadians. Positive, humorous, inclusive, and self-deprecating, these were the hallmarks of ParticipACTION’s campaigns and advertisements.

A 2004 study showed that 96% of Canadians could identify ParticipACTION by name or by its iconic pinwheel logo.⁶ To put the magnitude of this percentage in perspective, current social marketing experts aim for a brand recognition rate of 70% during a running campaign, and a rating above this amount is perceived as unattainable.⁷ In 2004, ParticipACTION had been

cancelled for three years, yet the vast majority of Canadians were still familiar with its mission statement and could identify at least one of its campaigns.

My current research is an interdisciplinary exploration of this organization from its creation in 1971 to its eventual termination in 2001. Although several post-mortem articles were composed by those involved with the organization, these lamentations spoke only of the organization's successes and the challenges that faced the 'New' ParticipACTION launched by the federal government in 2007. These works failed to address the reasons behind the original ParticipACTION's sustained impact of the Canadian cultural landscape as well as the social and intellectual milieu that fostered ParticipACTION's continuing cultural currency. This project is currently ongoing and will result in my forthcoming dissertation: 'ParticipACTION: A legacy in motion'. To date, I have completed the majority of archival research and have begun conducting oral interviews. My list of approved subjects include a variety of actors such as administrators, associated politicians, consulting academics, and community members who participated in local activity challenges. ParticipACTION was a Social Marketing organization affiliated with all levels of government employing tactics and teachings from the fields of Nutrition and Kinesiology to advance a Health Promotion agenda; it is the very definition of a multi-disciplinary topic that includes a tremendous amount a primary source material in both French and English. Housed at the University of Saskatchewan Archives, the ParticipACTION collection contains all internal documents, promotional material and ad mock-ups including cartoon scrapbooks, internal memos, faxes, and many meters of beta tapes.

Saskatoon is undoubtedly the most appropriate site for this repository as it is the birthplace of the ParticipACTION movement. In 1971, a cohort of individuals concerned with

Public Health, headed by Dr. Don Bailey of the University of Saskatchewan Department of Kinesiology, began a community-based initiative to encourage the people of Saskatoon to become more physically active. They posted full-page advertisements in the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* promoting the many healthy activities in which individuals could partake, and challenged Saskatoon to get up and get active. Saskatonians responded in record numbers. The ads were funny, self-deprecating cartoons, and the message was always up-beat and non-judgmental. Building on this success, the pilot group began a sister city challenge where Saskatonians would compete against citizens of Umea, Sweden – a city of similar size and demography – to record the most ‘active living hours’ by its citizens. This challenge was highly successful and soon attracted national attention.

Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau appointed Lester B. Pearson as the founding chairperson of *Sports Participation Canada*, a government funded, not-for-profit organization. Philippe de Gaspé Beaubien II, CEO of Quebec-based *Telemedia*, was appointed President and Dr. Bailey would become the longest sitting member of the ParticipACTION national board at a record twenty-five years. He was soon joined on the board by his former student, Russ Kisby of the National YMCA. Kisby brought a passion for public health and would eventual bring this zeal to the position of president, residing over ParticipACTION’s daily operations from 1978 to its closure in 2001. Drawing on the recent findings of the *Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism*⁸, two head offices were established, Head of English language programming in Toronto, and Head of French language programming based out of Montreal.

In 1973, *Sport Participation Canada* launched its first national television campaign, paying for six ads to appear in the course of the CFL season.

[Show the 60-Year-Old Swede Advertisement]

This was at a time when CTV, CBC, and Radio Canada shared CFL broadcasting rights and, according to media historian Mary Vipond, this also marked a period when these three media outlets held a significant market share of the Canadian television audience.⁹ Canadians were shocked by the ads' message, so much so that it even sparked debate in the House of Commons concerning the growing health crisis. In truth, although ParticipACTION was the most visible actor in this national concern over physical fitness, it should not be seen as the source so much as the result of intellectual and cultural currents.

I have developed a working theory that attempts to demonstrate how three burgeoning strains of intellectual thought converged during the mid-1970s, each working to buttress ParticipACTION's development through the 1980s. It was only during the 1990s when these three intellectual conversations began to shift that ParticipACTION lost its institutional and ideological footing. Employing the famous terminology of Marshall McLuhan, I have termed these three intellectual conversations the medium (Social Marketing), the message (Health Promotion), and the marketplace (Mass Media in Canada).¹⁰ Their deconstruction will be the focus of this paper.

Health Promotion: The Message

First is a discussion of the message, or the rise of the 'Health Promotion' expert. In the immediate post-war period, as outlined by Mary Louise Adams' 1997 *The Trouble with Normal*, psychological experts were turning their attention to public health education as a means of social engineering.¹¹ In 1951, this resulted in the foundation and first international conference of the

International Union of Health Education.¹² During the 1950s and 1960s, members of this growing field worked to justify their efforts as both ‘scientific’, and thus legitimate, and intrinsically important to the development of healthy societies. The growing consensus was that existing government funding of healthcare focused exclusively on illness rather than wellbeing, and that proactive measures were necessary to address the underlying causes of Canadians' sedentary lives and poor nutrition. This academic current was encapsulated in Minister of National Health and Welfare Marc Lalonde's 1974 report entitled *A new perspective on the health of Canadians*.¹³ In this, the founding document of the Public Health sub-discipline known as “Health Promotion”. Lalonde suggested that government must explore the four key elements of health: human biology, environment (both physical and social), lifestyle, and health care organization¹⁴ to truly address the health needs of Canadians. The new Health Promotion expert believed that the means to address these underlying causes lie not in the classroom but the community. Traditional models of health education had proved ineffective, so the new field of Health Promotion was a grass-roots community-based model challenging Canadians to re-evaluate their nutrition, lifestyle, and physical fitness choices at work, at home, and in the grocery store. *The Lalonde Report* gave these social scientists government sanction to dictate how Canadians should eat, exercise, drink, smoke, and sleep. To historians such as Denyse Baillargeon, and Jacalyn Duffin, the mention of such levels of state surveillance in health immediately sends up red flags, but interestingly, within the field of Health Promotion the perils of this level of government sanctioned social engineering are rarely recognized.¹⁵ To many, including field leaders such as Michel O’Neil and Ann Pederson, the period of the late 1970s and

early 1980s was a high water mark in Health Promotion development and credibility in the Canadian political and cultural milieu.

During this period, Canada was a world leader not only in Health Promotion theory but also in governmental health care innovation. This international standing was solidified in 1986 when Canada hosted the WHO 1st International Conference on health promotion in Ottawa wherein the principles of the *Lalonde Report* were adopted internationally in a document now termed in Public Health circles as *The Ottawa Charter*.¹⁶ Canadian Health Promotion experts were sought after the world over, but while Canada was at the forefront of Health Promotion theorizing, implementation was another story. As Health Promotion became professionalized, it lost its grassroots ties and neglected to innovate on the local level. This failure was compounded by the end of a period termed by Health Promotion expert Michel O'Neil as the "glorious thirties"¹⁷: the thirty-year period immediately following the Second World War when western economies remained strong, allowing for the continued expansion of the social welfare state. This period ended in the mid-1970s in Canada and, at the time, Health Promotion seemed the ideal solution to address rising national healthcare costs. It was an economic argument: keeping Canadians healthy meant reduced hospital usage rates and lower health care expenditures.

As it became apparent that academic theories were not effectively translating into broader social change through successful local programming, the healthcare conversation moved away from the promotion of individual health choices to more systemic health concerns. By 1990, Health Promotion was no longer the buzzword of the public health conversation. The new goal was 'Population Health', a premise that focused on collective health initiatives such as better affordable housings and education as a means of income improvement. These goals were in

many ways more general and removed from the purview of the Ministry of Health and Welfare and thusly a justifiable reason for the trimming of that ministry's budget.

This intellectual conversation speaks directly with the history of ParticipACTION, a grassroots movement that focused on changing the lifestyle decisions of individual Canadians. It stood as one of the few shining examples of Health Promotion in action, creating programming for schools, businesses, and seniors' homes at the community level. Each province had its own programming which received support from the two head offices in Toronto and Montreal. These locally created initiatives addressed the cultural uniqueness and local ethos of individual Canadians.

Within the local community, ParticipACTION moved beyond the traditional venues of the hospital and public health nurses' offices. It targeted Canadians from cradle to grave, and this pervasive programming speaks to why ParticipACTION has maintained brand recognition much longer than many public service campaigns. Many Canadians remember the badges they received in school, they were involved in Sneaker Days at work, or attended the opening of a Kinsmen ParticiPARK. Although as a Social Marketing campaign ParticipACTION was an unmitigated success, this accomplishment did not result in the raw numbers needed to convince government of its effectiveness or that of its underlying philosophy: Health Promotion. According to leaders in the field, this was Health Promotion's Achilles Heal: it defied quantitative analysis of its effectiveness. How does one measure the longitudinal health and financial benefits to Canadians who did not need to go to the doctor? In a field that was desperately trying to gain legitimacy through 'scientific innovation', their experiments did not allow for the kind of quantitative results scientists valued or understood.

The Medium (Social Marketing)

Pedagogically orphaned by a discipline that no longer espoused its tactics, ParticipACTION limped through the 1990s by clinging to its most valuable asset, its credibility and grassroots connectivity with Canadians. It occupied a very odd place in terms of its organizational model. It was not a government department, it was an NGO of sorts, but its funding model was initially set up in a formula wherein private sponsorships would be matched with government funds. It was not a marketing firm in the traditional sense, but while the early 1970s marked a turning point in public health philosophy it was also an exciting time for the burgeoning sub-discipline of advertising known as Social Marketing. Using propaganda to make a 'positive' change in human behaviour has a long tradition in Canada, but in 1971 these pursuits were codified as a professional business specialty. That year saw marketing experts Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman coin the term 'Social Marketing' in their pioneering article.¹⁸ These men suggested using advertising tactics such as the 4Ps – Product, Place, Packaging and Price – to advance social causes such as anti-smoking, environmental causes, and domestic violence awareness campaigns. In their analysis of this period of marketing development, Kotler and Nancy Lee have suggested that Social Marketing was placed 'on high' as evidence that marketing knowledge wasn't merely accrued for sinister capitalist gains, but could be employed in a beneficial manner to create positive social change.¹⁹ It became the redemptive example justifying the broader marketing industry.

In 1971, Philippe de Gaspé Beaubien, was appointed President of the future ParticipACTION by founding chairman Lester B. Pearson. While Bailey and Kisby brought the

Health Promotion knowledge, Gaspé Beaubien brought the media savvy. He understood ParticipACTION needed to employ marketing strategies to become a successful national brand. It was Gaspé Beaubien who suggested the newly founded *Sport Participation Canada* change its name to not require translation, a word that was neither French nor English but whose meaning was understood in both official languages. Thus, ParticipACTION was named in 1973.

Marketing experts have suggested that Social Marketing brands rarely last more than ten years before the general audience loses interest in their cause.²⁰ ParticipACTION endured nearly thirty years because it was not necessarily perceived as a national movement void of local ties or stagnant in its development. Its ability to diversify its message to discuss a range of health and nutrition issues, as well as its ability to meet regional flavour, gave ParticipACTION unparalleled longevity as a Social Marketing brand.

During the 1990s, and particularly after 1996 when Minister of Health Diane Marleau was replaced by David Dingwall and ParticipACTION federal funding was significantly curtailed, ParticipACTION rebranded itself not as an organization but as a Social Marketing company available for contract work on demand. This resulted in some of ParticipACTION's darkest days. It continued to provide national programming, but its corporate sponsors did insert their agendas. The Alberta Dairy Nutrition Council sponsored ParticipACTION's *Project Apex*, an educational program that encouraged Grades 4-6 students to maintain a nutrition journal with a particular focus on increasing their dairy product consumption.²¹ In New Brunswick, the *Healthy Active Living / Vie sainte et active* program targeting seniors was entirely funded by Health Alliance / Alliance sante, a Division of Astra Pharma Inc. and advocated proper prescription drug usage as a healthy daily ritual for all seniors.²²

These private companies were essentially purchasing ParticipACTION's brand credibility with Canadians. But private industry was not alone in recognizing the value of the ParticipACTION name. The federal government employed ParticipACTION as their 'Community Activation Unit' on several national campaigns in the wake of the 1995 Sovereignty Referendum. ParticipACTION had a long and reputable history in Quebec. Starting in 1973, all Quebec ads and interviews were original French content presented by Francophone Quebecers.²³ The ads were humourous, and Philippe de Gaspé Beaubien understood that humour defied direct translation. As such, ParticipACTION was adopted by Quebec to a degree unmatched by other federal programs. It became the promotional agency for the 1988 Petro Canada Olympic Torch Relay, CANADA 125, and Trans Canada Trail Relay 2000.²⁴ Although these contracts could be loosely related to ParticipACTION's original mission statement, it was clear that without an infusion of capital funds, it could not sustain this model indefinitely.

While its financial resources were dwindling, so too were its human capital and legendary grassroots support. With only a handful of full-time employees, the vast majority of its workforce were local volunteers. While head offices were predominantly staffed by full-time salaried men, the regional employees and volunteers were overwhelming women, providing hundreds of hours of free labour above and beyond their regular workday. During the late 1990s, either because of disillusionment or operational exhaustion, these local volunteer numbers dissolved, and ParticipACTION lost the critical asset of grassroots credibility. I hope to gain a more concrete understanding of this loss of grassroots support through my ongoing oral histories.

The Marketplace (Mass Media in Canada)

The third cultural current that initially aided ParticipACTION's development and then turned to its disadvantage is the development of the Mass Media in Canada between 1970 and 2000. Wonderful communication histories by Mary Vipond and Paul Rutherford have explained the rise of satellite television after the launch of Anik A1, the influx of American content, and the dawn of the New Media, and I will not restate their work here.²⁵ In terms of ParticipACTION, its involvement with the Mass Media is relatively straightforward: it employed a three-prong attack, launching ads in television, newspapers and radio. ParticipACTION depended on donated space from local providers, and the light and humorous nature of its ads ensured continued support. While many PSAs discussed difficult issues such as domestic violence, suicide, and alcoholism, ParticipACTION messages were universally positive and would not discourage or dissuade the audience from continuing to watch or listen. They proved hugely popular with programmers, accruing 8 million dollars in donated media space, in 1981 alone.²⁶ ParticipACTION focussed its TV exposure on Canadian stations such as CTV, CBC/Radio Canada, and TVA, but as these channels lost market share, so to did ParticipACTION. Long-time president Russ Kisby was not particularly fond of technology, for example warning against using such dangerous devices as the 'walkman' when exercising.²⁷ Needless to say, when the digital age hit, ParticipACTION had neither the human nor financial resources to take on this new frontier.

Conclusion

In 2000, President Russ Kisby announced his cancer diagnosis and retired after twenty-three years at the helm. This was the final blow to ParticipACTION. No longer at the avant-garde of Public Health strategy, having outlived its grassroots support, and unable to make a

significant impact in Canada's broadening mass media, the board of directors decided to fold the organization. Health scholars Adrian Bauman, Nick Cavill and Lawrence Brawley have asserted that ParticipACTION termination was due to "political pressure and government cutbacks".²⁸ I would contest the lack on contextualization in this assertion. In the 1970s when Canadians were struggling to define themselves as a multicultural and bilingual people, ParticipACTION was almost universally accepted as part of our cultural identity. While its impact on how Canadian perceive healthy active living is laudable in its own right, ParticipACTION transcended the scope of its public service mandate to have a strong and lasting cultural impact on what characteristics define Canadians. Self-deprecating, humorous, and willing to recognize our shortcoming and rise to a challenge: ParticipACTION messages, embodied many of the attributes still self-imposed on Canadians as a group. As one interviewee told me; "we saw the best of ourselves in ParticipACTION ads." A cultural institution with such strength and such a connection with the Canadian populous regardless of language, region and ethnic background could not be dismantled by mere political pressure. ParticipACTION ended because its cultural significance was simply not enough. In 2001, it was no longer at the forefront of Public Health strategy, its rebranding as a Social Marketing Company had seriously tarnished its reputation with its volunteer workforce and its inability to compete in Canada's changing Mass Media all worked to compromise ParticipACTION underlying institutional strength. Weakened by these three interlinking forces, only minimal political pressure was required to fold the organization. It had become a shadow of its former self. That it was re-launched by the federal government in 2007 speaks to the only asset that remained: its significant brand recognition with Canadians.

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² The Buggles, "Video Killed the Radio Star", *The Age of Plastic*, Island Records, 1979.

³ BodyBreak website, <http://www.bodybreak.com/about.html>

⁴ "Interview with Russ Kisby", *ParticipACTION Archives Project*, December 2003.

⁵ "Interview with Russ Kisby", *ParticipACTION Archives Project*, December 2003.

⁶ Faulkner G, McCloy C, Plotnikoff R.C., Bauman A, Brawley LR, Chad K, Gauvin L, Spence J.C., Tremblay M.S., "ParticipACTION: Baseline assessment of the capacity available to the 'New ParticipACTION': A qualitative study of Canadian organizations." *International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 2009, 6:87.

⁷ Philip Kotler and Nancy R. Lee, *Social Marketing: Influencing Behaviours for Good*, 3rd edition, 327.

⁸ A Davidson Dunton, Andre Laurendeau, Jean-Louis Gagnon, *Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism*, 1967-1970.

⁹ Mary Vipond, *The Mass Media in Canada: Who Decided What We Read, Watch, & Hear*, 4th edition, 2011.

¹⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media: the extensions of man*, New American Library, 1964.

¹¹ Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality*, University of Toronto Press, 1997.

¹² Michel O'Neill et al. "Introduction an evolution in perspectives", *Health Promotion in Canada: Critical Perspective*, 2nd edition. 2007.

¹³ M. Lalonde, *A new Perspective on the Health of Canadians*. Ottawa: National Department of Health and Wellness, 1974.

¹⁴ Michel O'Neill, 4.

¹⁵ Denyse Baillargeon, *Babies for the Nation: The Medicalization of Motherhood in Quebec, 1910-1970*, trans. by W. Donald Wilson, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009. Jacalyn Duffin, *History of Medicine: A Scandalously Short Introduction*, University of Toronto Press, 2000.

¹⁶ Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, First International Conference on Health Promotion, 21 November 1986 – WHO/HPR/HEP/95.1.

¹⁷ Michel O’Neill, 6.

¹⁸ Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman, “Social Marketing: An Approach to Planned Social Change”, *Journal of Marketing*, July 1971; 35. 3-13.

¹⁹ Philip Kotler and Nancy R. Lee, *Social Marketing: Influencing Behaviour for Good*, 3rd edition, SAGE Publications, 2008. p.7.

²⁰ Kotler and Lee, 373.

²¹ ParticipACTION Archives MG 291 2004.3, “Project Apex”, University of Saskatchewan Archives.

²² ParticipACTION Archives MG 291 2004.6, “Healthy Active Living”, University of Saskatchewan Archives.

²³ During the 1990s, French content went from original content to direct translation as a cost-cutting measure. This decision coincided with a shift from humour- to information-focused advertisements. Health information could easily be translated without making apparent its status as a translated text and, by this time, Quebec had already established a positive relationship with the ParticipACTION brand.

²⁴ ParticipACTION Archives MG 291 2004.5, .6, .10, University of Saskatchewan Archives.

²⁵ Mary Vipond, *The Mass Media in Canada: Who Decides what we read, watch, and hear?*, 4th edition James Lorimer & Company Publishers, 2011. Paul Rutherford, *Endless Propaganda: The Advertising of Public Goods*, University of Toronto Press, 2000.

²⁶ ParticipACTION Archive Project, “Timeline”.

²⁷ In the mid-1980s, Russ Kisby wrote a series of columns to be inserted in newspapers; 2 of these 98 columns discussed the perils of walkmans. “Walking with your walkman” “In Your Ears”. ParticipACTION Archives MG 291 2004.1, University of Saskatchewan Archives.

²⁸ Adrian Bauman, Nick Cavill and Lawrence Brawley, ParticipACTION: the future challenges for physical activity promotion in Canada”, *International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 2009, 6:89.