

ParticipACTION, Healthism, and the Crafting of a Social Memory (1971–1999)

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Résumé de l'article

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ParticipACTION, Healthism, and the Crafting of a Social Memory (1971–1999)

V. LAMB DROVER*

Abstract

Established in 1971, ParticipACTION was a social marketing company created to change the physical behaviour and personal views of Canadians through persuasive marketing techniques and re-enforced mass media branding. Charting the personal accounts of four influential historical actors, this paper explores the original motivations behind the establishment of ParticipACTION. Through oral history accounts, untapped archival records pulled from the ParticipACTION Archives, and government documents, this article follows the development of the ParticipACTION brand and its relationship with a nation of media consumers. The overt commodification of health, manipulation of Cold War fears, and the federal government's behaviour modification agenda are all aspects of its origin story, yet they have been strategically omitted from the dominant social memory of this national health promotion organization because these founding goals no longer served the ParticipACTION brand.

Résumé

Lancée en 1971, ParticipACTION était une entreprise de marketing social créée pour influencer sur l'activité physique et les opinions personnelles des Canadiens grâce à des techniques de marketing de persuasion et au renforcement d'une image de marque dans les médias de masse. En suivant les témoignages personnels de quatre acteurs influents de l'époque, le

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présent article explore ce qui a motivé la création de ParticipACTION. Se fondant sur des témoignages oraux, des sources inexploitées tirées des archives de ParticipACTION et des documents gouvernementaux, l'article suit la trajectoire de la marque ParticipACTION et sa relation avec une population de consommateurs de médias. La marchandisation ouverte de la santé, la manipulation des craintes entourant la guerre froide et la volonté du gouvernement fédéral de changer les comportements sont autant d'aspects de l'histoire des origines qui ont été stratégiquement omis de la mémoire sociale dominante de cet organisme national de promotion de la santé puisque ces objectifs fondateurs ne servaient plus la marque ParticipACTION.

For nearly 30 years, ParticipACTION remained a constant in Canada's popular culture, with a brand that was well established and widely understood by Canadians. Between 1971 and 1999, ParticipACTION (Sport Participation Canada), a social marketing agency funded by the Canadian federal government and private sponsorships, created promotional advertising that reached into Canadian schools, workplaces, and homes through television, print, radio, and billboard campaigns.¹ This agency's primary objective was to increase public awareness of the need for daily physical activity and healthy lifestyle choices.²

This article will explore the motivations behind the establishment of ParticipACTION and the subsequent suppression of these in the face of a changing cultural environment. There is significant evidence to indicate ParticipACTION's founding had as much to do with advancing Canadian Cold War sports performance as it did increasing the fitness level of everyday citizens. That this aspect of ParticipACTION's founding has been largely forgotten speaks to how the agency's organizers and supporters have, in ensuing years, actively constructed its legacy and origin story to omit the details that no longer served to further the ParticipACTION brand and their healthism agenda.³

The critical examination of any origin story or creation myth is, without exception, an exercise in offending. In modern Western society, dominated by a culture that demands scientific fact and definitive truths, it seems that the existence of conflicting narratives and multiple tellings in an origin story must imply duplicity

on the part of the sources, a judgment that works to undermine the credence of the story itself. In reality, the need to seek out and identify a definitive history, or black-and-white version of events, only works to preference certain sources and individuals while marginalizing and offending others. This process of anointing and damning speaks more to the author's own value system and personal bias than to any potential service to academic historical inquiry. It is with this idea in mind that this article on the origin of ParticipACTION, and how it is constructed and remembered, is written. There are conflicting narratives drawn from primary written, secondary written, and primary oral history sources. None of these sources will be preferred, but all will be contextualized in order to gain a better understanding of why ParticipACTION's origin story holds such an important place in the constructed dominant social memory of this organization.

The building of an origin story holds many similarities to the honing of a social marketing brand. Even the terms origin 'story' and creation 'myth' belie an undertone of untruth or, perhaps more aptly, 'spin'. As religious scholar John Badertscher explains:

Any narrative, whether intended to bear mythic truth or not, will not have a single fixed meaning. In literate cultures, this can be forgotten, as the canonical form of a narrative can lead one to forget the contribution of the context in which the story is read or heard, and the necessity of interpretation by both reader and hearer. The dynamic character of myth thus renders definitive interpretation impossible. Nevertheless, it is possible for an outsider to any religion, with sufficiently respectful objectivity, to make relatively valid observations about the way in which a myth expresses the faith within which it is transmitted.⁴

This article will endeavour to offer such a measured and considerate interpretation of how ParticipACTION was founded, what purpose the organization was intended to serve, and discuss how the framing of this origin story has helped to shape what Canadians remember and forget about this prolific public marketing brand.

The Postwar Preoccupation with Physical Fitness

ParticipACTION was the cumulative result of 20 years of government health theorizing. While federal government interest in public fitness stretched back to before Confederation,⁵ it was the Second World War that brought increased attention and media coverage of this constantly pressing national issue. In 1943, the *National Physical Fitness Act* was enacted as part of a growing basket of social services provided by the federal government. Under this act, each province was offered \$250,000 in matching funding to support the development of physical education programming.⁶ This grant conveniently coincided with the creation of a string of physical education degree programmes at Canada's major universities. The University of Toronto (1940), McGill (1945), University of British Columbia (1946), Queen's (1946), and the University of Western Ontario (1947) all answered the call to provide the physical education experts Canada 'needed'.⁷ According to historian Mary Louise Adams, the immediate postwar period also marked the disarmament of a cadre of seasoned health professionals who turned their gaze away from Canada's military forces and toward the Canadian public as a whole.⁸ The apparent need for these experts' services was great, or at least it was constructed as such, as the conversation surrounding physical fitness was entirely couched in issues of national pride and security. A Division of Fitness was established in order to ensure that Canadian citizens became efficient employees, healthy citizens, and ready and waiting soldiers.⁹ Under the auspice of the Department of Health and Welfare, the Division of Fitness, in partnership with the Fitness Council, created a series of pamphlets concerning the acute need for regular exercise. The response from the public was a small but swelling concern for the physical state of the nation.¹⁰

The emerging consensus that Canadians were unfit received scientific validation with the publishing of the Kraus-Weber Tests results in 1954.¹¹ Using a rubric of five physical fitness indicators, Drs. Kraus and Weber of Columbia University tested a random sample of 5000 American and 5000 European chil-

dren to measure how many could meet their stated benchmarks of fitness. The results of this national testing jumpstarted the moral panic regarding the health of American children. While eight percent of European children were found wanting, this number paled in comparison to the 57 percent of American children who failed the test.¹² The publicized results were shocking to an American public that turned to health professionals for answers and solutions. This type of national fitness testing was not conducted in Canada, but Canadian health activists quickly made the inference that what stands true for the United States mirrored Canadian's national health as well.¹³ The Kraus-Weber Tests received extensive media coverage. Public awareness of a mounting crisis quickly became an entrenched truism built on trusted scientific studies and repeated at the highest levels by political and public figures.¹⁴

The Cold War 'Sports' Race

The power of sport as a microcosm of societal conflict as well as a site for the reinforcement and testing of established social norms is currently being explored by a variety of interdisciplinary scholars. Social historians of sport such as Bruce Kidd and Alan Metcalfe have been joined by kinesiologists specializing in health promotion such as Don Morrow and his colleagues at the International Centre for Olympic Studies (University of Western Ontario) in critically examining sport's interlocking role in Canadian politics, economics, and media development from 1807 forward.¹⁵ Gender and race scholars such as Kevin Wamsley and Mary Louise Adams have delved into figure skating and boxing as important sites of negotiated masculinity and places of racial empowerment while international comparative scholars such as Andrew Holman have established that a country's perceived sports identity is inextricably linked to constructed national identity both at home and abroad.¹⁶ This rich body of research suggests that sports cannot be discounted as apolitical leisure activities, but rather powerful totems of nationalism, international political prowess, and personal identity.

The 1960s marked a period of intense scrutiny of international sport as a perceived demonstration of a nation's power and capabilities. In this international atmosphere of heroic champions of national ideologies, Canada was floundering. During the 1960, 1964, and 1968 Olympics, Canada was unable to rank in the top 20 countries competing. This perceived failure was worsened by the nine successive losses at the World Ice Hockey Championships during the decade.¹⁷ The political value of sport was made overt by Prime Minister John Diefenbaker in a 1960 parliamentary debate: "In the field of sports today, there are tremendous dividends in national pride from some degree of success in athletics. The uncommitted countries of the world are now using these athletic contests as measurements of the evidence of the strength and power of the nations participating."¹⁸ Canadian athletes, and by extension the Canadian population from which they were recruited, were not only letting down the country, but democracy, and the free world. The following year brought another federal act (*An Act to Encourage Fitness and Amateur Sports*) to solidify the pressing need for physical fitness programming.¹⁹

It was into this political fray that ParticipACTION was born. The health promotion advertising company seemed an elegant solution to the created crisis in national health that was crippling Canada's contribution to the Cold War 'sports' race. Yet government involvement in physical fitness during the Cold War would have to be nuanced in the light of the public perception of similar programmes. Firstly, Nazi Germany's National Health and Hitler Youth programmes made the idea of government-funded national fitness wholly unpalatable to western democracies. As Charlotte Macdonald has proven in her recent work exploring Commonwealth national fitness programmes surrounding the Second World War, funding for similar initiatives in Australia, New Zealand, Britain, and Canada all but disappeared.²⁰ Secondly, postwar direct government funding of sport also became a clear point of division between the Communist and democratic approach to government involvement in the leisure time of its citizenry. As one member of the Senate Task Force on Physical Fitness and Amateur Sport suggested, the direct funding of sport

was simply viewed as an unfair and sinisterly Communist tactic. As such, the Canadian government was caught between the need to promote physical fitness as a bulwark of national defence, and the need to refrain from overtly interfering in personal liberties as the Nazis and/or Communists did. According to the Senate Task Force report, the solution to this stalemate was government funding of physical fitness. "There was an unspoken all-party attitude that it was essential to do something for Canadian sport, but that such action was politically risky unless fitness could be used as a cover. In other words, it was the righteous armour of fitness that provided the justification for the entry of government into the field of sport."²¹ In this Cold War milieu, if physical fitness became the "righteous armour" of democratic warriors, ParticipACTION proved the struggle's most effective war propaganda machine. For 29 years, this advertising agency reached into Canadian homes, schools, offices, and libraries to "educate, motivate, and mobilize."²² The success of the ParticipACTION brand in influencing public perceptions of health cannot easily be disputed, and as with any successful child, many people stake claim to its parentage and formative development.

Sources and Schisms

Many sources were consulted in understanding how exactly ParticipACTION came to be and what purpose it was intended to serve. This article is drawn from a larger dissertation research project interrogating the complete ParticipACTION Archives. Created by longtime ParticipACTION President Russ Kisby and housed in the University Archives and Special Collections branch at the University of Saskatchewan, this collection contains 7.6 meters of textual materials, along with 12 meters of audio-visual materials in the form of VHS tapes, Beta tapes, and CD-ROMs covering every ParticipACTION campaign and independent contract between its creation in 1971 and its eventual closure in 1999.²³ Advertising mock-ups, unredacted internal correspondence, campaign strategies and assessments, as well as three independent national impact and awareness surveys are

contained therein.²⁴ Adding to these extensive written archives are 23 collected oral histories from ParticipACTION employees, management, event participants, volunteers, government liaisons and government documents, as well as three academic theses that directly address ParticipACTION and its management.²⁵ In investigating these diverse sources concerning ParticipACTION, four distinct narratives of the origin story began to take shape: the origin stories of Philippe de Gaspé Beaubien, Richard Baka, Keith B. McKerracher, and Russ Kisby. While these individuals represent divergent origin stories, these four accounts are also supported by sources that corroborate and nuance each version of this important story.²⁶

Gaspé Beaubien: The well-connected media mogul

In unpacking this narrative, it is most appropriate to begin with the origin story of the man who claims to be ParticipACTION's founder²⁷, Philippe de Gaspé Beaubien. The list of Mr. Gaspé Beaubien's accomplishments is long and distinguished: Mayor of Expo '67, founder of one-time media conglomerate Telemedia, Officer of the Order of Canada, and former chair of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters.

According to Gaspé Beaubien, coinciding with the Expo year (1967), the federal government started the Centennial Athletic Awards Programme for Canadian Youth to encourage physical fitness among this important social demographic. Gaspé Beaubien was supportive of the initiative but felt that more needed to be done to encourage Canadians to become more physically fit. After Gaspé Beaubien's duties with Expo began to wind down, he approached his childhood friend, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, with an idea based on his personal passion for physical fitness and sport.²⁸ Gaspé Beaubien then gathered an influential group of media moguls to create a public service organization that would be charged with promoting the physical fitness message to Canadians. Chaired by former Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, this 'who's who' of Canadian business elite lobbied the federal government to fund this worthwhile cause. This narrative

is supported by ParticipACTION's early commemorative histories which place the initiative for ParticipACTION's founding squarely on the conscientious corporate citizens who comprised the original board.²⁹ In Gaspé Beaubien's narrative, the role of the federal government is significantly less pronounced than that of private citizens in the initiation of ParticipACTION.

Richard Baka: The academic on the ground

Complicating this philanthropic depiction of the organization's founding, is the federal Fitness and Amateur Sport Study commissioned in 1968 by Minister of Health and Welfare, John Munro, and conducted by P.S. Ross and Partners.³⁰ Among the report's findings was a call for the creation of "an agency that is charged with the responsibility of the leisure time of all Canadians in both a direct and coordinative function."³¹ Responding to the report's recommendations, the Ministry of Health and Welfare launched an experimental social marketing agency, independent of the federal government yet dependent on government funding, which would work to decrease health care costs by selling Canadians on the benefits of physical activity.³²

This view of ParticipACTION as a government pilot project is heavily supported by the three academic theses written separately by K.A. Somerville, Richard Baka, and Alan McFarlane. In 1983, K.A. Somerville wrote her Master of Science in Physical Education thesis at the University of Saskatchewan. The focus of her study was a quantitative analysis of the effectiveness of the ParticipACTION Saskatoon Pilot Project on the long-term health outcomes of the people of Saskatoon. Her narrative of ParticipACTION's pre-history depended heavily on the writings of J. L. Gear who emphasized the previous quantitative studies in physical fitness rates which worked to support the need for government involvement in physical fitness programming.³³ As such, her discussion of ParticipACTION's origin centres on the created Senate Taskforce and the subsequent government's initiation of the programme. Her study understandably turns away from the national context to discuss ParticipACTION Saskatoon

and the quantitative study she conducted on the ground. Writing over a decade later, Alan J. McFarlane explored a comparative analysis of the social marketing effectiveness of ParticipACTION and Fitness Ontario as part of his Master of Human Kinetics degree requirements at the University of Windsor. McFarlane showed little interest in the details surrounding ParticipACTION's founding and heavily cited Richard Baka's version of events in the brief historical preface to his more contemporary comparative study. Baka's 1975 Master of Arts thesis provides the most substantive academic history of ParticipACTION's origin to date. Studying at the University of Western Ontario, Baka explored the role of ParticipACTION in the delivery of health care services in Canada. Completed only four years after ParticipACTION's founding, Baka's study depended heavily on available government documents and several personal interviews with important ParticipACTION stakeholders such as Keith McKerracher (President 1972–1978) and Russ Kisby (President 1978–2000).³⁴ Baka's study explored the business model of ParticipACTION and how a marketing company could work to complement other federal, provincial, and local health service providers. Baka's thesis then offered recommendations on how best to develop the programme. Having spent a great deal of time at the Toronto head office of ParticipACTION, Baka had the unique opportunity to observe and record the history of ParticipACTION while it was forming. By all accounts, Baka's thesis was created before the underlying values of the ParticipACTION brand were entrenched and, as such, many of the rough edges of the origin story had yet to be chipped away. This is not to say that Baka's version of the creation story is the 'truest', but rather, for the purpose of this history of ParticipACTION's social memory, Baka's thesis reveals several aspects of ParticipACTION's founding that have been strategically forgotten by later tellings because these parts of the story no longer fit within the constructed dominant memory of this organization.

These rough edges prominently take three forms. First is the overt discussion of intended behaviour modification and the justified commodification of physical fitness by a corporate

body. Second is the unapologetic discussion of the intended Cold War benefits of this vein of public programming. Third is the blatant government's attempt to convey this message through ParticipACTION without the Canadian population being aware of this association. For instance, while later versions of the creation story would discuss ParticipACTION's role in promoting "public awareness"³⁵, Baka's oral interviews are entirely blunt regarding the company's marketing objectives. According to an interview conducted with President McKerracher in 1973, "PARTICIPaction [sic] is trying to sell fitness ... the same way you sell beer and soft drinks ... How else but through the art of advertising are you going to make sweating popular."³⁶ The clear commodification of health as a component of the origin story is significantly downplayed in all later ParticipACTION advertising and promotional material. This softening in marketing tone can be largely attributed to the departure of Keith McKerracher in 1978. If the roughed out image of ParticipACTION had a physical embodiment, that image would be Keith McKerracher.

Keith McKerracher: "the marketing genius"³⁷

Originally recruited by Philippe de Gaspé Beaubien to act as Director General of ParticipACTION in the spring of 1972, the former Carling Beer advertising executive was a well-known "marketing genius"³⁸ in the business community. McKerracher viewed physical fitness as any other product, and this marketing approach was approved by the Board of Directors and ParticipACTION staff, almost all of whom were drawn from the business and media communities.³⁹ McKerracher's businesslike marketing approach was hugely successful with the Canadian public and with the media industry. In the 1972–1973 fiscal year, the federal government renewed and increased ParticipACTION's annual grant through the Fitness and Amateur Sport Directorate to the amount of \$300,000.⁴⁰ With this grant, McKerracher and his small team generated \$3,127,000 in donated media exposure.⁴¹ The return on investment was over 10: 1, a ratio that continued to grow annually under McKerracher's leadership. With such

a successful launch largely attributable to McKerracher's business model, the question bares asking: why does McKerracher's name not appear more prominently in ParticipACTION's commemorative histories or on the ParticipACTION Archive Project website? He is rarely mentioned by any sources, whether written or oral. As will be explained, Keith McKerracher and his transparent approach to what ParticipACTION ought to achieve, simply did not fit into the nonthreatening image that later incarnations of ParticipACTION were trying to convey. It was an issue of tone, approach, and polish.

Perhaps an example will best illustrate how McKerracher's tactics, although highly successful with the Canadian public and the media, did not correspond with ParticipACTION's later vision and marketing approach. The Canadian Football League requested a 15-second advertisement that could be featured on both English and French language stations and would appear at the end of the half-time break during six televised games over the course of the 1973 season. Drawing on a book still under peer review by Dr. Roy Shephard at the University of Toronto that suggested among other comparative international findings that "some Swedish men at age sixty had the same fitness level as some Canadian men at age thirty,"⁴² the ParticipACTION team put together the following ad:

(Focus on two sets of legs jogging along a well-worn wooded path, one in red pants, the other in blue.)

Voice over: These men are about evenly matched.

(Cut to the runners' faces. First a thirty-year-old Canadian man in red track suit with an average build who is working hard to keep pace with his running mate. Then cut to a white haired and bearded Swedish man in his sixties wearing a blue track suit smiling as he effortlessly runs along.)

Voice over: That's because the average thirty-year-old Canadian is at about the same physical shape as the average sixty-year-old Swede.

(Pan out to full view of men running on the path)

Voice over: Run, Walk, Cycle. Let's Get Canada Moving Again!⁴³

The ad was short and to the point. It employed binary logic⁴⁴ — unfit vs. fit, 'us' vs. 'them', red vs. blue, young vs. old, the North American way of life vs. the European way of life — and then ended with the presentation of a solution to this constructed national crisis: ParticipACTION. That the central comparison was, at best, loosely based on the massaged results of one scientific study, and, at worst, an outright lie, seemed unimportant to the Canadian public. It was memorable. Prime Minister Trudeau mentioned the 'Swede ad' in the House of Commons, and the Swede comparison became a frequent cocktail party topic across the country.⁴⁵ The 60-year-old Swede quickly became the poster-child for ParticipACTION and, by extension, the Canadian physical fitness crisis.

Although the 60-year-old Swede was a highly successful advertisement that still holds currency with the Canadian public more than 40 years after its launch, the ad encountered significant criticism from the physical education and health services communities. According to both Russ Kisby⁴⁶ and longtime ParticipACTION Board member Dr. Don Bailey⁴⁷, the 60-year-old Swede and, by extension, ParticipACTION in those initial years were not well liked by these experts. As Richard Baka discovered, "detractors of Participaction's [sic] sixty year old Swede slogan are legion."⁴⁸ While such prominent Canadians as fitness celebrity Lloyd Percival stated, "there's no way they can back up the statement in that ad."⁴⁹ In truth, the claim in the Swede ad could not be substantiated. The commercial employed shock advertising and overt nationalism. Although effective with the Canadian population, the academic community was incensed. The invalidity of the Swede message worked to undermine the credibility of thoroughly considered academic findings regarding the physical fitness of the nation.⁵⁰ It seemed that for McKerracher selling fitness to the population was much easier than pleasing the industry that he was working to promote.

In an oral interview for this study, former ParticipACTION Director of Media Relations Catherine Fauquier described the environment in those earlier years. While McKerracher could be personally brash and difficult to work with, “there was an excitement”⁵¹ surrounding ParticipACTION and its advertisements that must be attributed to McKerracher’s marketing knowledge and leadership.⁵² Upon joining ParticipACTION, McKerracher quickly learned that television and radio stations were being inundated with hundreds of PSA (public service announcement) requests. They were often poorly-written mimeographed letters that asked local stations to write the script, produce the ad, and report back to the requesting organization the number of times the advertisement was shown. McKerracher realized that ParticipACTION could easily rise to the top of this pile of requests by employing simple marketing strategies. Using Toronto-based radio firm Listen Audio, ParticipACTION produced its own radio advertisements for the reduced cost of \$500 per ad,⁵³ and these ads were mass-produced so that radio stations would have a variety of choice. Rather than an impersonal letter signed with a stamp, these ads would be delivered by one or two young and attractive staff persons who would work to develop a personal rapport with the station owners and producers. These hand-delivered, professionally produced radio commercials were welcomed by radio stations and listeners alike.⁵⁴ McKerracher remembers one instance in 1977 when ParticipACTION received a request from a radio station in PEI.⁵⁵ ParticipACTION ads were so popular at this particular station that listeners were calling in making requests. Responding to this interest, the station requested ParticipACTION’s advertising collection so that it could produce a ‘best of’ show for its listeners.⁵⁶

A similar cost-saving business model was employed in television production. McKerracher’s Montréal Vice President, Jacques Gravel, arranged for ParticipACTION television ads to be shot by professional television crews during other clients’ production downtime caused by weather or other delays. This allowed professional quality ads to be produced for a fraction of the cost.⁵⁷ With these types of creative tactics, according to

McKerracher, ParticipACTION could punch above its weight as an advertising client. McKerracher wrote: “By 1976 it was our estimate that ParticipACTION had become the 5th or 6th largest advertiser in Canada, and we didn’t spend a cent buying space or time.”⁵⁸ The success of McKerracher’s business model and marketing approach is difficult to dispute, but his emphasis on selling fitness through high-pressure messaging only loosely based in fact simply did not meet the expectations of the physical fitness community.

Russ Kisby: “the Heart of ParticipACTION”⁵⁹

The physical fitness advocates that created ParticipACTION were looking for a marketing agency to ‘get the message out’ for the dozens of federal, provincial, municipal, and private physical fitness organizations in Canada. They wanted effective marketing but did not appreciate the tactics employed by a marketing expert. In a sense, the physical fitness community wanted to find a treatment for the perceived lethargy of Canadians, but McKerracher’s marketing cure left a bad taste in their collective mouths. As a result, few examples remain of McKerracher’s early campaigns because they did not fit into the later constructed image of ParticipACTION as an upbeat, positive, and motivating fitness brand. This fact only adds to the historical value of Richard Baka’s study as it offers several examples of campaigns not housed in the ParticipACTION Archives or featured on the ParticipACTION Archives Project website. These include many ads produced by Listen Audio and written by Terry O’Malley’s team at Vickers & Benson, with slogans such as, “Join the Canadian minority group: The Fit”, “The True North **Strong** Weak and Free,” and “In Europe they call us ‘Canada Fats’”.⁶⁰ ParticipACTION staff admitted that these ads were intended to “shock Canadians” but even if the messages “hurt”, people would realize they were probably “true.”⁶¹ The tone of these campaigns are far more critical than later ParticipACTION programming which featured benign motivating messages such as, “Keep Fit and Have Fun!” or “Grab on to the Good Times!”⁶² It is not

surprising that in an archive built by Russ Kisby, these earlier advertisements would be significantly downplayed. They simply did not fit within his vision of ParticipACTION's values. The exception to the rule is, of course, the 60-old Swede. This is the only McKerracher campaign that was kept in the origin story of ParticipACTION because it was far too well known to be omitted from the historical record. This advertisement has remained part of the ParticipACTION's dominant social memory because of its continued cultural cachet with Canadians who are now 45 years and older. While it is an enduring part of Canadians' social memory of ParticipACTION, its much more aggressive tone and emphasis on the performance of citizenship through physical fitness are not critically examined by the Canadian public.

In many ways, the interpretation of ParticipACTION's origin story comes down to competing visions of what ParticipACTION should embody. For Keith McKerracher, physical fitness was a commodity that needed to be sold to Canadians in the most effective way possible. If this meant shocking Canadians with catchy messages feeding on the ambient fear of the Cold War, then so be it. While McKerracher's campaigns used a variety of coercive marketing tactics to achieve ParticipACTION's goals, the underlying objectives of his work was refreshingly honest and transparent. As McKerracher stated in a 1974 address, "I'm a peddler and my product is exercise."⁶³

Competing against this transparent coercion and edgier messaging was the vision of ParticipACTION espoused by Russ Kisby, a ParticipACTION that effectively hid its intended behaviour modification agenda beneath a gentler and more positive marketing approach. In a 2003 interview, Kisby noted, "Our style [at ParticipACTION] is to be a little more entertaining ... to candy-coat the message".⁶⁴ In the battle of these competing visions of ParticipACTION, it is clear that Kisby's approach won the day as his vision embodies the dominant social memory of this organization. Canadians remember the ParticipACTION that Kisby honed during the 1980s and 1990s, while McKerracher's forthright manipulation in the 1970s is all but forgotten.

The transition between these two competing visions was not without controversy. Don Bailey spent more than 25 years on ParticipACTION's national board, and liked and worked equally well with both McKerracher and Kisby. According to Bailey's account, in 1978 McKerracher was quietly removed from the post of President under a cloud of inappropriate travel expenses. Coming from the world of academia, Don Bailey, the self-described "token jockstrap"⁶⁵ on the board, was shocked at how quickly the board went about removing the President. "I thought it was ruthless, within fifteen minutes they had agreed on severance and he was gone."⁶⁶ The damning expenses had been uncovered by Toronto-based Vice President, Russ Kisby, who thereafter assumed the post of President.⁶⁷

This narrative is complicated by the written account composed by Keith McKerracher for the use of this study: rather than conducting an oral interview, Mr. McKerracher preferred to offer his account of the history ParticipACTION in writing. According to him, he had agreed to work for ParticipACTION in 1972 under the understanding that he would continue to take on other clients within his consulting firm. By 1978, with two of his four daughters in college, McKerracher felt that ParticipACTION was taking up too much time and not paying him enough. When he approached the board regarding a salary increase, he was let go.⁶⁸ In his written narrative and email correspondence, McKerracher expressed his sadness regarding his omission from the many commemorative histories and anniversary press pieces about ParticipACTION.⁶⁹ His name appears rarely in the ParticipACTION Archives created by Russ Kisby prior to his death in 2007. McKerracher's campaigns, innovative marketing strategies, and successful business model are extolled in Kisby's archival finding aids, but never credited to McKerracher himself. These innovations are always credited to the organization as a whole, using the passive voice. For instance, in one overview discussing the 1972–1978 PSA Campaigns, it is stated: "ParticipACTION was able to have high quality, contemporary advertisements professionally prepared."⁷⁰ Reading the silences, it becomes clear that Russ Kisby used the passive voice and cor-

porate name to effectively remove McKerracher from the official ParticipACTION archives and historical record.⁷¹ It is difficult to gauge whether this omission was intentional or merely the subconscious performance of Kisby and McKerracher's strained relationship, but regardless of the intent, the result remains the same. McKerracher's name has been effectively buried or removed from ParticipACTION's dominant origin story.

While much that pertains to the early years of ParticipACTION is open to interpretation, the importance of McKerracher's contribution cannot be disputed: under McKerracher's leadership, Sports Participation Canada became ParticipACTION. It was McKerracher who used his marketing connections to persuade Wolfgang Letzin and Stan Libera to design the iconic pinwheel logo for free. And it was McKerracher who produced the enduring 60-old Swede ad. Even the business model of producing low-cost ads for use in donated television and radio airtime was McKerracher's idea.

Under the direction of Russ Kisby, ParticipACTION post-1978 continued with the same name, logo, and business model, but began to assume the humorous, positive, and inspirational persona often cited in Canadians' recollection of the brand. While the rough edges of overt marketing, Cold War motivations, and government involvement gradually fell by the wayside in the public image of ParticipACTION, the old tactics, motivations, and intentions were still there, just more effectively hidden.

Government Involvement Downplayed

The relationship between ParticipACTION and the Government of Canada adds yet another complicated perspective to ParticipACTION's origin story. While the government funding of ParticipACTION is unquestionable, the actual relationship has proven far more difficult to define. According to Mr. Gaspé Beaubien, ParticipACTION was a private philanthropic initiative funded through both public grants and private sponsorship. On the other hand, government documents — such as the report by the Senate Task Force on Physical Fitness and Amateur Sport — state that ParticipACTION was a public initiative purposefully kept

outside the federal government structure. Regardless, the desire to keep ParticipACTION at arm's length from the government proved beneficial to all parties involved. The board members and employees of the company could frame their work as a philanthropic public initiative removed from the somewhat suspect oversight of government, while federal officials could sidestep accusations of direct funding of sports or, conversely, of coercively manipulating the behaviour of Canadians to reduce health care costs. With this in mind, ParticipACTION stands as a tangible example of Nikolas Rose's neo-liberal 'governance' in action.⁷² ParticipACTION lobbied to change the behaviour of the citizens of a nation using soft power and persuasive messaging rather than an overly prescriptive or punitive approach. It proved a stroke of social marketing genius and a balancing act that required constant attention and adjustment.

By the early 1970s, individual Canadians were also weary of seemingly heavy-handed government involvement in their lives. Coupled with perceptions of oppressive regimes in the Eastern Bloc, Canadians had been exposed to the anti-government movements in Vietnam War-era America. Domestically, the election of Pierre Trudeau furthered this notion of individual freedom from government prescription, most famously espoused by Trudeau's changes to the *Criminal Code*, and embodied by the assertion that "there's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation."⁷³ As such, while Canadians may have been leery of public service announcements from the Government of Canada, few would be alarmed by a series of upbeat and benign cartoons discussing walking, jogging, and cycling presented by a public service group. In fact, one of the main reasons given for the changing of Sports Participation Canada's name to ParticipACTION three years after the organization's founding was that the original name resembled other recently established federal bodies such as Sport Canada and Recreation Canada. Even though ParticipACTION's annual grant through Health Canada provided all the necessary operating funds for the organization, the underlying desire to distance Sports Participation Canada from the federal government required a marked deviation from the

standard government name format.⁷⁴ This consideration facilitated the programme's careful construction of its public identity sufficiently removed from any government influence. This ambiguity regarding the relationship between ParticipACTION and the Government of Canada was intentionally constructed and effectively engrained in the dominant social memory of the organization. This was necessary for ParticipACTION to meet the objective of combating Communist sport dominance without appearing to use Communist social tactics.

Health Promotion and ParticipACTION

In 1974, then Federal Minister of Health and Welfare Marc Lalonde drafted a report that was based in the nascent school of thought in health theorizing, known as 'Health Promotion'. Health Promotion advocates felt that government funds earmarked for health could be more effectively used if the emphasis shifted the focus on the individual health choices of Canadians. Rather than treating ill patients, Health Promotion advocated preventative medicine through healthier lifestyle choice. Lalonde's report, entitled *A new perspective on the health of Canadians*⁷⁵ (hereafter to be referred to as the Lalonde Report), pointed to four key indicators of health: human biology, environment (both physical and social), lifestyle, and health care organization.⁷⁶ His report stated that while previous federal funding had focused on human biology and health care organizations, a new strategy must emphasize the social determinants of health. The Lalonde Report proved to be a foundational document in international public health theorizing. Here was a federal government seemingly willing to acknowledge and address the underlying social disparities that contributed to the ailing health of its citizenry. Overnight, Canada became a world leader in public health theorizing and implementation. Canadian public health professionals were sought the world over, and Canadian policies and promotional campaigns were watched intently.⁷⁷ This status continued for over a decade and resulted in Canada hosting the first international conference on health promotion in Ottawa in 1986.⁷⁸

As well intentioned as this programming seemed at the time, it did not necessarily serve the best interests of the majority of Canadians. Firstly, it gave health experts and social scientists state sanctioning to monitor the day-to-day lifestyle choices of Canadians. Secondly, a common reading of this theorizing shifted the onus and responsibility for maintaining a person's health from community and state to the individual alone. This emphasis on individual responsibility was made overt in the influential 1974 article written for the journal *Daedalus* by John Knowles, physician and president of the Rockefeller Foundation. It was Knowles' view that the "blame for an unhealthy society [lies] on the personal habits of individuals".⁷⁹ He believed that people needed to stop depending on organized medicine and government health services to improve their health and take personal responsibility for their health choices.

While ParticipACTION messaging focused on the responsibility of the individual to attain physical fitness, it should not be inferred that the success of individual Canadians did not hold broader national implications. As explained in the 10th Anniversary Booklet written by Russ Kisby and created for ParticipACTION in 1981:

Our mandate at ParticipACTION is to promote increased physical activity and improved fitness among Canadians. Our practical objective is to move people to take positive personal action. Everything we do works on two levels: the personal and the national. Implicit in our mandate and in our practical aims is the idea, not just of getting individuals fit, but of building a fit nation.⁸⁰

This nationalist rhetoric proved a highly effective marketing tool: appealing to individual Canadians to perform their patriotism through physical activity, pressuring the federal government to continue its annual grant to the agency, and encouraging sponsors to act as good corporate citizens by supporting ParticipACTION. References to Canadian nationalism became a mainstay of ParticipACTION advertising from its creation well into the 1980s.

One spin-off of this advertisement was the Saskatoon vs. Umea Great Ga Lunka Lop / Run, Walk, Jog of 1975. Russ Kisby's hometown of Saskatoon, SK, was selected as ParticipACTION's first test city for local programming in 1972.⁸¹ After a series of internal citywide challenges, Saskatoon decided to challenge a city of comparable size and demographic make-up in Sweden to a physical fitness competition. The citizens of each city would record their physical activity in one-hour increments over a three-day period (12–14 May 1975). The cities would announce their tallies each day and the city with the highest cumulative score on the third day would be declared the winner. With constant progress updates being broadcast by Saskatoon's only local television station, CFQC (later to join with the CTV network),⁸² Saskatonians came out in record numbers, winning by a margin of two percent with an average of 41.8 percent of its citizens exercising for at least one hour each day over the three-day period.⁸³ As part of the build-up to this event, ParticipACTION Saskatoon offered weekly prizes to Saskatoon citizens who reported their physical activities. These Achievement Week Award winners were presented with a ParticipACTION hat and t-shirt as well as having their name listed in the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* newspaper.⁸⁴

As part of this historical investigation, these Achievement Week Award winners were contacted to discuss their memories of ParticipACTION and their views on physical fitness. Nearly 40 years later, the response rate was expectantly low with only 12 percent reporting.⁸⁵ While the memories of each individual varied significantly, some commonalities proved insightful. The respondents vaguely remembered their personal win and prize, but the more substantive memory and the one they could speak to with the most passion and detail was the Great Ga Lunka Lop / Run, Walk, Jog. None could remember the name of the city in Sweden and most had indeed forgotten the name of the competing country. What did remain a salient piece of their experience was the conviction that they had "beat" the "Europeans" or, in one respondent's recollection, the "Soviets."⁸⁶ This conflation of memory between the Swedish nation and the Soviet Bloc,

although historically inaccurate, speaks to the unconscious link that Canadians may have made between the messaging in the 60-year-old Swede advertisement and Canada's physical fitness/sport contribution to the Cold War cause. That the Achievement Week Awards and the Great Ga Lunka Lop / Run, Walk, Jog came on the heels of the 1972 hockey Summit Series may have also contributed to this melding of national sentiment and personal memory during the height of Cold War fears.⁸⁷

Conclusion

Paul Rutherford has added his voice to the many postmodern theorists suggesting that since the 1960s, the body has become a frequent battleground of control. In his 2000 work *Endless Propaganda*, Rutherford rebrands publically-focused propaganda as 'civil advocacy.' "Civil advocacy fashions a world full of problems but also full of solutions, a place where social issues are individualized and personal agency is celebrated. Leaders become retailers, citizens appear as buyers. Answers lie in the mass consumption of public goods."⁸⁸ ParticipACTION is a clear example of civil advocacy in action, and particularly the sub-category of health advocacy outlined by Rutherford. Individual Canadians were told that it was within their power to make the lifestyle changes necessary to not only become fit and contributing members of Canadian society, but as a means of performing their national duty. Their consumption may not have taken the form of a monetary purchase, but they were effectively buying into an idea that had been repeated to them in every form of media for almost three decades. Health advocacy messaging depicts the body as always under threat, be it from smoking, tanning, drinking, overeating, or promiscuity. Ill-equipped to identify and stave off this constant barrage of threats brought on by our own personal vices, health advocacy is effective because it generates a "low-level fear — naturalized fear, ambient fear"⁸⁹ which has become a daily part of North American life. Engrossed with fear, few members of a society think to question the efficacy of this messaging and, as such, health advocacy produces engrained

social truths constantly affirmed through a process of continued reinforcement. According to Rutherford, fear is an remarkably effective marketing tool. Fear can justify drastic action; fear can silence discussion and dissenting voices; fear can provoke citizens to undertake prescribed action.⁹⁰ Succinctly put, “promoting fear is another way of exercising power”.⁹¹ Rutherford concludes that the end result of this continuing proliferation of civic advocacy in the public sphere is the establishment of postmodern democracy, wherein the agenda is set by those who control the message, not necessarily those who are democratically elected to create policy.⁹² With this ambient fear effectively entrenched, ParticipACTION programming could successfully shift from overt comparison to European competitors and the Cold War threat to more subtle suggestions of nationalism and patriotism.

Gaspé Beaubien, McKerracher, Kisby, and Baka provide exceptionally divergent narratives of how and why ParticipACTION came to be. The role of the Government of Canada in initiating the corporation, the personal motivations of those involved, and the intended outcome of ParticipACTION’s programming are all points of contention that cannot be definitively resolved. With these observations in hand, this much can be stated: ParticipACTION’s origin story has shifted over time to support the developed image of the organization. Any overt discussion of the commodification of health, behaviour modifying attentions, or intrinsic connections to the federal government have been consciously removed because these components of ParticipACTION’s origin did not work to support the positive, motivating, and benign dominant social construction of what ParticipACTION was and what it was trying to achieve.

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Endnotes:

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 - 17 Canada won the WIHC in 1961 only.
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 - 19 Richard Baka, "PARTICIPaction: An Examination of its Role in Promoting Physical Fitness in Canada," (MA thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1975), 4.
 - 20 Charlotte Macdonald, *Strong, Beautiful and Modern: National Fitness in Britain, New Zealand, Australia and Canada, 1935–1960* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013).
 - 21 W.H. Rea, et al. *Report of the Task Force on Sports for Canadians* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1969), 16.
 - 22 Russ Kisby's Overview Notes, ParticipACTION Collection, University of Saskatchewan Archives, MG 291–2004.
 - 23 Accurate numbers have been drawn from Victoria Lamb Drover's email correspondence with founding archivist Cheryl Avery, University of Saskatchewan Special Collections, 17 June 2013.
 - 24 MG 291 2004-41, ParticipACTION Archives, University Archives and Special Collections, University of Saskatchewan.
 - 25 All interviews were conducted by V. Lamb Drover and authorized by the University of Saskatchewan's Behavioural Research Ethics Board, Beh# 12-36. Research Approved: 25 March 2012. Renewed 2013–2014.
 - 26 Kathy Ann Somerville, "Participaction Saskatoon: A Local Promotional Campaign for Physical Activity and Fitness," (M.A. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1983). Alan J. McFarlane, "An Analysis of the Social Marketing of Physical Activity Promotion: The Comparative Case Study of ParticipACTION and Fitness Ontario," (M.A. thesis, University of Windsor, 1994). Baka, "PARTICIPaction: an examination of its role." "A Fit Nation", *PARTICIPACTION's 10th Anniversary Report, 1971-1981 A Decade of Action* (Toronto: ParticipACTION, 1981), 6. ParticipACTION Collection, University of Saskatchewan Archives, MG 291-2004.
 - 27 This claim has been disputed by ParticipACTION's former president, Keith McKerracher, in his written testimony for this study.

- 28 Oral Interview with Philippe de Gaspé Beaubien, 13 November 2012, 10:30 CST for *ParticipACTION: A Legacy In Motion*, outgoing dissertation research, V. Lamb Drover, University of Saskatchewan, Behavioural Research Ethics Board, Beh# 12-36, 2013-5.
- 29 Peggy Edwards, *ParticipACTION: Catalyst for a Healthier Lifestyle*, ParticipACTION Collection, University of Saskatchewan Archives, MG 291-2004-5.
- 30 P.S. & Ross Partners, *Fitness and Amateur Sports Study Proposal*, Mimeo-graph (Note 2): 32 Section IX as appearing in Somerville, "Participaction Saskatoon: A Local Promotional Campaign for Physical Activity and Fitness," 8.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid., 10.
- 33 J.L. Gear, "Factors influencing the development," 2-25.
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- 36 Baka, "PARTICIPaction: an examination of its role," 133.
- 37 Oral Interview with Dr. Don Bailey, 17 September 2012, 11:30 CST for *ParticipACTION: A Legacy In Motion*, outgoing dissertation research. V. Lamb Drover, University of Saskatchewan, Behavioural Research Ethics Board, Beh# 12-36, 2013-5.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Kisby and Bailey remained the outliers of this group, both coming from a background of physical education.
- 40 Kisby's Overviews, 52 "ParticipACTION Funding and Media Exposure (\$,000)", Participaction Collection, University of Saskatchewan Archives, MG 291 2004-41.
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- 42 Peggy Edwards, "No Country Mouse: Thirty Years of Effective Marketing and Health Communication," *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 95, Supplement 2 (2004): S6-S13.
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- 44 Paul Rutherford, *Endless Propaganda: The Advertising of Public Goods* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 20.
- 45 Baka, "PARTICIPaction: an examination of its role," 170.
- 46 Oral history, "President Russ Kisby discusses the early criticism ParticipACTION received for its methods," December 2003. ParticipACTION Archive Project, <http://scaa.sk.ca/gallery/participaction/english/motivate/theearlyyears.html> <Viewed 14 December 2012>.
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- 48 Baka, "PARTICIPaction: an examination of its role," 143.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 This consensus among Canada's physical fitness experts has been independently reported by Baka, Kisby, and Bailey.
- 51 Oral Interview with Catherine Fauquier, 23 September 2013, 10:30 CST for *ParticipACTION: A Legacy In Motion*, outgoing dissertation research. V. Lamb Drover, University of Saskatchewan, Behavioural Research Ethics Board, Beh# 12-36, 2013-5.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Personal history narrative written by Keith B. McKerracher, 20 September 2013, for *ParticipACTION: A Legacy In Motion*, outgoing dissertation research. V. Lamb Drover, University of Saskatchewan, Behavioural Research Ethics Board, Beh# 12-36, 2013-5.
- 54 Ibid, corroborated by Oral Interview with Catherine Fauquier, 23 September 2013, 10:30 CST for *ParticipACTION: A Legacy In Motion*, outgoing dissertation research. V. Lamb Drover, University of Saskatchewan, Behavioural Research Ethics Board, Beh# 12-36, 2013-5.
- 55 Personal history narrative written by Keith B. McKerracher, 20 September 2013 for *ParticipACTION: A Legacy In Motion*, outgoing dissertation research. V. Lamb Drover, University of Saskatchewan, Behavioural Research Ethics Board, Beh# 12-36, 2013-5.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Oral Interview with Roger Duval, 27 September 2012, 9:00 CST for *ParticipACTION: A Legacy In Motion*, outgoing dissertation research. V. Lamb Drover, University of Saskatchewan, Behavioural Research Ethics Board, Beh# 12-36, 2013-5.
- 60 Baka, "PARTICIPaction: an examination of its role," in promoting physical fitness in Canada," 145.

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- 63 Keith B. McKerracher, Presentation given at the CAHPEP National Convention, 1 June 1974, as found in Baka, "PARTICIPaction: an examination of its role," in promoting physical fitness in Canada," 56.
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