

The McDonaldization of Society by George Ritzer

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Reviewer: Hamid Yeganeh, Assistant Professor, College of Business, Winona State University, Minnesota, USA
www.winona.edu

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Introduction

In his book entitled 'The McDonaldization of Society', George Ritzer nicely encompasses concepts from sociology, management, and economics to provide a profound understanding of our modern society. According to George Ritzer, McDonaldization is defined as the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world. Toys "R"Us, Wal-Mart, Gap, Jiffy Lube, and Home Depot are all examples of companies that want to become the McDonald's of their industry. The success of McDonald's is also evident worldwide as over half of the company's revenue comes from overseas operations serving 50 million customers a day. Indeed, this fast-food restaurant has become more than just a company. It has become a part of our culture.

McDonaldization's Process

Ritzer argues that the success of McDonaldization can be explained through four dimensions. The first dimension is efficiency. For consumers the restaurant offers an efficient way to go from hungry to full. Workers at McDonald's also operate efficiently by following predesigned steps of a process. The second dimension is calculability which focuses on the quantitative aspects of McDonald's products. Examples include portion size, cost, and the amount of time it takes for the customer to get the product. This is important because people in the U.S. now view quantity as being as important as quality. People also calculate how much time it will take for them to get to a McDonald's rather than eat at home. Predictability is the third dimension. When a person goes to McDonald's he or she can be sure that the product is going to be the

same every time they go. The fourth dimension of McDonaldization is control. This is exerted over the customers with the use of lines, limited menus, and uncomfortable seats. These methods of control cause people to eat quickly and leave. While McDonald's has become an inevitable part of our society, there are still some sectors that are not affected. One aspect of un-McDonaldized society can be traced to the earlier pre-modern age, such as the 'mom and pop' grocery store. Although their operations have not been affected by McDonaldization, they are becoming rare due to the competition of Wal-Mart. Through his analysis, Ritzer refers to bureaucracy theory as proposed by the German sociologist Max Weber. Weber maintained that the modern West is marked by rationality and consequently is dominated by efficiency, predictability, calculability, and non-human technologies that control people. In the same vein, Ritzer considers the McDonaldization process as an amplification of this theory. Formal rationalization means that people's search for the optimum means to an end is shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures. The bureaucracy ultimately leads to fewer options because virtually everyone can make the same optimal choice. Although the bureaucracy does not offer many options it still has advantages within the four dimensions of rationalization. First, the bureaucracy is viewed as the most efficient structure for handling tasks with large amounts of paper work. Second, bureaucracy values the quantification of as many things as possible. The third advantage is that because of rules and regulations, bureaucracy operates in a highly predictable manner. Finally, bureaucracy emphasizes control over people through the replacement of human judgment with rules, regulations, and structures.

The Forces that Drive McDonaldization

According to Ritzer, there are three important factors which contribute to the increasing prevalence of McDonaldization. These factors are: material interests, the culture of



the U.S. which values McDonaldization as an end itself, and the degree to which McDonaldization is attuned to important changes taking place in society. Through McDonaldization economic goals and aspirations can become more easily attainable. It has become an end in itself in that people value efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control and will seek them out whether economic gain will result or not. The third explanation for the rush toward McDonaldization is that it meshes well with other social changes taking place throughout the world. The fast-food model thrives in a society that emphasizes mobility; therefore these restaurants suit a society in which people prefer to be on the move.

McDonaldization and Efficiency

Although the fast-food industry did not create the desire for efficiency in society, it has helped efficiency turn into a universal reality in everyday life. The streamlined process of McDonaldization has spread to other restaurants within the fast-food industry. Other restaurants such as Taco Bell, Burger King, and Domino's have all created processes to get customers in and out as quickly as possible. The frozen food industry sprang up as a result of the demand to speed up and simplify home cooking. Dieting and exercise has been affected by McDonaldization as well. Diet books now promise shortcuts to weight loss, pills are sold to lose weight, and diet centers sell prepackaged dried food. Some other areas of society that have been affected by McDonaldization include shopping, higher

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education, healthcare, and entertainment. The department stores, shopping malls, and even gas stations have all become streamlined stores which allow consumers to buy products quickly and efficiently. Universities now provide assessments that can be graded by a machine, leaving academics more time for research and publication. Likewise, because of DVDs people no longer see it as efficient to go to the movie theater. Now more efficient modes of entertainment are available such as Netflix, which allows consumers to have movies delivered directly to their homes. People can also now listen to audio books instead of reading them.

McDonaldization and Calculability

Ritzer uses the term calculability to describe how a McDonaldized society like the United States of America emphasizes quantity over quality. The emphasis on quantity in fast food restaurants leads to decreased quality for the customers, but customers are not the only people that suffer from the restaurants striving for quantity instead of quality. The most efficient way to produce mass quantities of food is to have the food preparation process broken down into several individual parts. Like Henry Ford's assembly line, each worker is conducting one small task repetitively which leads to employees feeling no sense of personal meaning or pride in their work. Thus, both the employees work experience and the services provided by the employees suffer a decrease in quality. Ritzer argues that everything in a McDonaldized society must be quantifiable. For example, in the current day educational system in the United States "the focus seems to be on how many students ('products') can be herded through the system and what grades they earn rather than the quality of what they have learned and of the educational experience" (Ritzer, page 84). Ritzer points out that the entire educational system has become quantified in the sense that the students are now evaluated by their Grade Point Average (GPA) and how their GPA ranks against that of their fellow classmates. Also, colleges have become quantified by how they rank against other colleges in any particular area. Similarly, television shows are quantified because stations use a ratings system to determine which shows stay on the air and which shows will be cancelled.

McDonaldization and Predictability

When customers walk into a McDonalds anywhere in the world they will get the same experience regardless of location. The employees will be wearing the same

uniforms and addressing the customer with the same basic responses. The same repetitive tasks not only increase efficiency, but also enable companies to consistently produce the same products each time, thus making the employees duties predictable. Predictability and McDonaldization have hugely affected the movie industry in the United States. The customers need for predictability in a McDonaldized society has led to a significant increase in movies with unoriginal plots and movies with multiple sequels. Ritzer uses movies such as: The Ring, Spiderman, Saw, The Matrix, Shrek, and Mission Impossible, to exemplify modern movies that have spawned multiple sequels. It seems that the customers feel more comfortable with movies that are not completely original. According to Ritzer, sequels and movies with unoriginal plots are more likely to succeed at the box office than movies that are completely original, and therefore the profits are more predictable. Another way that the movie industry has succumbed to predictability is the rating system that is applied to all movies. Predictability has also affected how people living in a McDonaldized society go about their shopping. Most people now do their shopping in malls, which are filled with McDonaldized shops that sell the same predictable products in all of their stores throughout the world.

McDonaldization and Control

According to Ritzer, the non-human technology is controlling not only workers, but also consumers as well. For instance, at McDonald's the non-human technology increases the control over the employees making sure that customers are getting exactly what they wanted every time they place an order. The same can be said for doctors and how they treat their patients. The main doctor is now just the start of the process of diagnosing what a patient may have. The doctor will send the patient elsewhere after examining the patient, perhaps to a specialist or to other experts. In essence, the general practitioner or family doctor isn't the solution anymore like it used to be. A person's doctor is just the start of a long pathway for some patients who are trying to figure out what is wrong. People with creative ways of doing work aren't always the ones coming out on top, especially in 'blue collar' jobs. Ritzer talks about U.S. airlines and how every minute of their work on the clock must be accounted for. When you think of a pilot and how much control they have of an airplane you'd think it would be a pretty big job. Ritzer explains how on the contrary pilots'

jobs have been McDonaldized by on board computers that basically run the plane between take off and landing of the plane. In short, most jobs are controlled by a system that is in place. In a McDonaldized society, the non-human technology controls the customers as well. For instance, customers face a variety of structural constraints and they follow the norms when they enter a fast-food restaurant. All of these are ways to control customers at fast-food restaurants to act in a manner in which the business wants them to act. Ritzer elaborates on the effects of non-human technology in universities, hospitals, and supermarkets and illustrates how they are controlling customers' wants and needs. Fast-food restaurants today have little preparation. Everything is pre-cooked, wrapped, cut, and seasoned. To go even further the process in which the food is cooked is already predetermined. Ritzer reflects on birth and death and illustrates how our lives are becoming McDonaldized. The clinics guarantee a live baby. Giving birth to a child is becoming more common in hospitals than anywhere else such as a home. At hospitals the birth process has been standardized to a series of efficient steps. Ritzer points out: "Women are herded like sheep through an obstetrical assembly line, are drugged and strapped on tables where their babies are forceps delivered" (Ritzer, Page 135). The author goes further to argue that people today have the ability to slow down the death process by getting medical attention and care rather than just letting life have its way. Deaths are mainly controlled by hospitals today.

The Irrationality of Rationality

While the bureaucracy offers many advantages, it suffers from what Ritzer describes as the irrationality of rationality. Bureaucracy can create a dehumanizing place for a person to work in or be served in. Aside from the dehumanizing effect, there are several other irrationalities. Bureaucracies can become inefficient when there are too many regulations. Also, bureaucracies can become unpredictable as employees grow unclear about what they are supposed to do and clients do not receive the service that they expect. For instance, in a McDonaldized society, customer service is becoming standardized and void of any real friendliness, thus it is becoming ineffective.

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Another example is that people know fast food isn't good for their health but yet they still eat it, because it is efficient, cheap, and fast. People have taken McDonaldization to an extreme where if they can't have their dinner made within ten minutes they find something else that is quick and easy. Not many household moms cook large dinners anymore and actually have a sit down dinner. People's lives are demanding to be faster and faster due to McDonaldization. Many parents do not have time to sit down and read to their kids anymore, because in a McDonaldized society even the McDonaldized books can be found on audio books and TV. Ritzer argues that even sex and intimate relations are becoming McDonaldized as people rely on certain medications that speed up the sexual arousal. Ritzer goes further and blames the McDonaldization for its negative effects on the natural environment. The increase of farm animals and chemicals and the trash from fast food restaurants are some examples of such negative effects. Similarly, McDonaldized education, online courses, and bigger class sizes have prevented students and instructors, from having that close interaction that they had previously.

Globalization and McDonaldization

The idea of glocalization is that global institutions are brought into the local community. McDonald's is trying to standardize and homogenize other parts of the world; as such it is a globalizing force. The outcomes of globalization and glocalization are also discussed as being either 'something' or 'nothing'. 'Something' can be described as being indigenously created from the local culture. It is also important for 'something' to be substantial and have deep meaning. 'Nothing', on the other hand, is often centrally conceived and is devoid of any real content or meaning to anyone. Thus, something has more meaning, flavor, character, or history. Nothing is empty, forgettable, and made to please everyone by making it boring and similar to everything else. Some examples of globalization of something include museums, traveling art exhibits, concerts, and knowledgeable tour guides. All of these examples cater to limited audiences but deliver something that is unique and meaningful through a standardized process. Globalization of nothing is when something is watered down to appeal to a wider range of tastes and it is offered at low prices and in high demand. Globalization of nothing is the easiest way for companies to expand because they make everything the same, in every location, and market it the same.

As a result, the process of McDonaldization is spread on a global scale. On the other hand, the glocalization of nothing can be demonstrated through the transformation of tourist areas. It can be seen that as there is higher demand for something, it leads to it being transformed into nothing. An example is a souvenir shop that now sells items that reflect the local culture but may be made in another part of the world. Finally, the glocalization of something can be described as something not mass produced, only made or sold locally, and which often has a meaning to a certain location. After looking at all of these combinations, the author makes the case for why McDonaldization can be considered an example of either the 'globalization of nothing' and the 'glocalization of something'. As the globalization of nothing, McDonald's and other fast food restaurants are seen as giant multinationals that come into other countries to bring standardized foods and processes that mean nothing to the local people. McDonaldization also has the power to cause local restaurants to transform to become more like McDonald's and spread the processes of McDonaldization to the rest of the world. Because the local communities are able to change the ways that things are done, they can see the McDonaldization processes as their own. McDonald's tries to adapt itself in many ways to become as much as part of the local culture as possible, and can thus be seen as the 'glocalization of something'. Although the basic processes and menu may still remain, McDonald's tries to customize its menus based on local tastes, preferences, and customs.

Dealing with McDonaldization

The author brings up many ways for people to help themselves and society to deal with the increasing McDonaldization in our society. He states that people generally fall into one of three cages that summarize their view. In the velvet cage are people who are not threatened by McDonaldization, but instead enjoy and are comforted by the rationalization and the predictability it brings to society. The rubber cage is for people who dislike some aspects of McDonaldization, but at the same time like other aspects of it. They are usually the one who recognize the cost of becoming too McDonaldized and try to find ways to temporarily escape the process. The third type is the iron cage, and these people are more pessimistic and try to fight back against the McDonaldization process. Indeed, more and more people fall into the velvet cage group because they are increasingly dependent on fast,

quick, convenient, and predictable products and services. These people may fall in the second category for luxury or hobbies, but overall they like to know what will happen before they do anything. Also one may dislike the McDonaldization process for different reasons such as, working conditions or to defend the interests of small and local restaurants/businesses.

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