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Consuming or consumed? Postdigital McDonaldization for human sustainability

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Abstract

A concept which took Max Weber's classic theory of the rationalisation of the West and adapted it in 1993 to fast-food restaurants seems an unlikely contender to be informing us on human and global sustainability three decades later. Yet in a postdigital society, Ritzer's primary components of McDonaldization may hold more relevance than ever. In our tribute to George Ritzer, we notice how McDonaldization sheds light on how human beings now interact with data both online and offline, as willing prosumers, within a web of artificial intelligence. In celebration of Ritzer's career, we highlight the ongoing sustainability of his McDonaldization thesis and stress its importance for building a more just and a more sustainable future.

Keywords

George Ritzer, McDonaldization, prosumerism, postdigital, irrationality of rationality, artificial intelligence, McUniversity, McPolicy, McSustainability, McJustice

From bureaucracies through to fast-food restaurants

Basing his McDonaldization thesis on Max Weber's theory of rationalisation of the West, George Ritzer (1983, 2021 [1993]) demonstrated a historical transformation of the organisational model of bureaucracy. Showing the uncanny semblance between the workings of today's public services and corporations and the emblematic fast-food restaurant, Ritzer extended Weber's ideas into more sectors of society than could ever have been

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imagined (Ritzer and Dean, 2019: 186). Describing complex ideas using a simple and accessible metaphor, Ritzer's theory of McDonaldization is imbued with a rare quality in that it can quickly be appreciated by citizens and scholars alike.

Since the first mention of 'The McDonaldization of Society' in Ritzer's 1983 article (Ritzer, 1983), and its subsequent expansion in the 1993 book by the same title (Ritzer, 2021 [1993]), the main dimensions of McDonaldization – *efficiency*, *calculability*, *predictability*, *control* and the *irrationality of rationality* – have been applied to numerous other contexts. Due to its penetrating insight and vast area of application, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Ritzer, 2021 [1993]) has become 'generally considered as one of the most important sociological works of the late twentieth century' (Ritzer et al., 2018: 113). Ritzer's scholarly contributions reach far beyond the theory of McDonaldization, as evidenced in his rich bibliography and especially editorial work in some of the key sociological encyclopaedias and handbooks (e.g. Ritzer, 2011, 2012). For better or worse, however, McDonaldization has remained Ritzer's most popular contribution to knowledge – and the one that permanently invites new reinventions.

From fast-food and online prosumerism to artificial intelligences

In the late 20th century, Ritzer (1983, 2021 [1993]) poignantly described McDonaldized employees working in dehumanising roles, with the rest of us eating takeaway food in our cars and, as 'prosumers', undertaking unpaid labour as we order via self-checkout systems and clear our own tables. In a postdigital world marked by deep entanglements between the analogue and the digital (Jandrić et al., 2018), new forms of online prosumerism have merged with these physical practices. To take just one example, social networking has seen vast quantities of material generated by users (consumers) rather than the owners of social media companies (Ritzer and Dean, 2019: 157). Unlike many sociological theories of its day, the McDonaldization of society has seamlessly entered the age of the computer.

The powerful exposé through Ritzer's theory, of people who have been convinced to work for nothing, is now extended to demonstrate the enormous profits made from this mass of human–data interaction (HDI) (Hayes et al., 2023). Ritzer (in Ritzer et al., 2024: 3) further provides us with the convincing transition from a past where technologies controlled what people did to artificial intelligence (AI) that 'is mimicking and increasingly controlling, if not replacing, people's thinking'. Ritzer's theory continues to be relevant in the bricks-and-mortar world yet also is deeply 'attuned to the digital world' (Ritzer et al., 2018: 115). Postdigital McDonaldization is of a 'multiple, complex, and entangled nature … apparent in the equally entangled emotions', and intertwined with '[t]he presence of generative artificial intelligences, the surveillant nature of social media' (Gourlay, 2024) – and many other technologies.

The 'irrationality of rationality'

Once Ritzer's principle of how rationality leads into irrationality might have been illustrated through the irony of a fast-food restaurant that becomes so popular it generates

huge queues and ceases to be 'fast'. The irrationality of rationality also bears huge environmental consequences (Ritzer, 2021 [1993]; one example in agriculture in Morris and Reed, 2007). In the context of AI, we see what might be called rational systems, trained on human data and activities,

> coming to dominate, if not replace, human (not artificial) intelligence. This subordination of human intelligence to artificial intelligence (a non-human rationality) is an increasingly important example of the 'irrationality of rationality'. And it is more difficult to counter than many other irrationalities of rationality because of its invisibility and the fact that it lies at the base of all sorts of new and yet-to-be-developed technologies. (Ritzer et al., 2024: 5)

AI carries a mixed bag of positive and negative impacts. A good case in point is education, where authors report a degree of relief from boring, unsatisfying tasks such as administration, assistance in writing, and other positive effects, as well as negative effects associated with originality, most notably plagiarism, uncertain effects on labour markets, the environmental impacts of AI's energy consumption, and others (Bozkurt et al., 2024; Xiao et al., 2025). Depending on one's positionality (Hayes, 2023), the net sum of these impacts on a person can vary. Some people can thus feel that AIs have made a positive overall impact on their lives, while others can feel that AIs have made a negative overall impact on their lives.

Regardless of AI's impact, in a postdigital society, everyone is a prosumer of data (see Ritzer et al., 2024). An important underlying irrationality arises in relation to who is, or is not, included in the data that trains AI systems. Although it may be a relief *not* to be targeted by online surveys, cookies and surveillance systems, if digitally disadvantaged or minority groups are excluded from data collection used to train AI systems, then inequities of representation arise across different demographics and marginalised communities (Hayes et al., 2023).

The relatively recent field of HDI – consisting of the core tenets of *legibility*, *agency* and *negotiability* (Mortier et al., 2014) – is helpful in exploring how people experience and might resist a McDonaldization of their data. This could include predatory forms of data harvesting by companies where terms of use fail to be legible, or forms of surveillance such as the monitoring of homeworking where employees lack agency or a forum to renegotiate such working conditions. Numerous complexities now arise due to the hybrid and all-consuming nature of data, so it can be illuminating to examine both the tenets of McDonaldization and those of HDI, together, to get a sense of the macro and micro implications of the postdigital consumption experience.

These days, there are many regulation efforts and scholarly discussions about the ethics and regulation of data – from basic levels of regulating data collection and usage, such as Europe's introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR),[1] to conceptual discussion such as the crafting of a possible new postdigital social contract for higher education in the age of AI (Hayes et al., 2024). Given the rapid development of AI's capabilities, authors at all levels agree that AI legislation requires continuous updating and that discussions need to be permanently continued (see Bozkurt et al., 2024 for the case of education). The notion of the irrationality of rationality, together with frameworks such as HDI, continues to be an essential aspect of these discussions.

Postdigital consumption

The ways in which material and digital sites augment each other in the realm of consumption (Ritzer and Miles, 2019: 4) is postdigital in nature and therefore is 'hard to define; messy; unpredictable; digital and analog; technological and non-technological; biological and informational' (Jandrić et al., 2018: 895). Given such a rupture in our existing theories, multiple rationalities may be at play (Feenberg, 2017) alongside 'the intensification of McDonaldization' (Ritzer and Miles, 2019: 16).

Just as we look towards alternative ways of understanding processes of consumption in postdigital society, Ritzer's theory builds a helpful ground. Postdigital research approaches (Jandrić et al., 2023a, 2023b) understand production and consumption ecologically, across different physical and digital spaces and places and in bioinformational forms (Peters et al., 2022). Particularly pertinent to this are these observations:

> Processes of digitalization provide the foundations upon which heterogeneous forms of consumption become increasingly normalized. A cursory glance around the streets of a city and the number of people walking around gazing at the screens of their mobile phones is indicative of just that. But the irony here is that the more diverse the consumption experience becomes, the more the ideological power of consumer capitalism is reinforced. In this sense, heterogeneity brings with it conformity and homogeneity. (Ritzer and Miles, 2019: 17)

This is a typical case of McDonaldization at work. Fast-food restaurants are fast and efficient but are not exactly known for their health and gourmet quality; digital technologies offer a lot of convenience at the expense of quality of interaction. As evidenced by testimonies of teachers and students who experienced the sudden pivot to online teaching and learning during the pandemic (see Jandrić et al., 2020), McDonaldization brings about a mashup of good and bad consequences.

The McUniversity

Amid this discussion of Ritzer's contributions to how we appreciate rationalisation in globalised society and changing human and artificial intelligence are articles and books that have drawn from his notion of the McUniversity and students as consumers of educational services (Ritzer, 1996). In *Beyond the McDonaldisation of Higher Education*, Dennis Hayes (2017) explored ways to challenge the McDonaldization of thought and ideas in terms of regaining academic freedom, asking how inevitable a continued growth of McDonaldization is.

The notion of higher education McPolicy has been explored through empirical analysis of predictable linguistic structures in policy. Their repetition seems not to require input from humans at all, when standard buzz phrases appear to be credited with enacting all kinds of academic labour (Hayes, 2019). There have been comparisons made too, between the precarity of McDonald's employees and the casual academic roles deployed in universities. Here, interesting distinctions have been made between the managing of labour in a fast-food outlet and the rather different control of 'measured outputs' within higher education (Hayes, 2021; Nadolny and Ryan, 2015).

Ritzer himself, however, has frequently though been open and reflexive about the extent to which the components of McDonaldization play out in different situations, and where new complexities arise. It is indeed a distinct strength of his theory that it can continually arrive, and be critically appraised, within different forms of 'postdigital dialogue' (Jandrić et al., 2019) including in relation to ongoing matters of sustainability and social justice.

McSustainability and McJustice

We can reflect on both the sustainability of the McDonaldization thesis itself and also – with an eye to the future – examine how others have applied it in relation to human and global sustainability. In *McSustainability and McJustice: Certification, Alternative Food and Agriculture, and Social Change*, Maki Hatanaka (2014) argued that, in enabling the expansion of alternative food and agriculture, McSustainability and McJustice allow little opportunity for farmer empowerment and food sovereignty. Furthermore, aspects of sustainable farming or ethical production that are not easily measured, standardised and validated tend to be excluded.

This is an ongoing challenge that McDonaldization helps us to identify, again and again, equally in predigital and postdigital contexts. What elements of human life and production cannot be measured, refined or standardised for commercial purposes become marginalised. At the same time, human ethical values of social justice and sustainability are cherry-picked for the elements that can be capitalised for the purposes of profit. One example is the now ubiquitous discussion about the ethics of monetising digital data (Komljenović et al., 2024) and regulation of data collection and usage (Hayes et al., 2023), in new and previously unforeseen contexts such as infrastructuring educational genomics (Williamson et al., 2024).

Yet there are other areas of life where resistance to McDonaldization can be observed. For example, the Slow Food movement (Petrini, 2015) has sought to empower people across the globe to regain control over access to their food, including how it is produced and by whom, and how it is distributed. Others too have applied this concept towards academia, to call for greater deliberation, reflection and dialogue, in the face of the consumer model of education, suggesting that a Slow Professor can take back the intellectual life of the university (Berg and Seeber, 2016). Crane (2023) has questioned whether AI and 'synthetic' content production are the new fast fashion. This is asked given that they each share ethical and environmental concerns, speed over quality and excessive consumption levels, as well as the potential time-saving benefits. As a reaction to 'churnalism' and poor-quality news, she cites the development of slow journalism as a more considered approach to what media content we consume. Then there are further physical examples in terms of niche book stores and artisan coffee shops that have arisen where people seek a more personal, curated experience. Thus, one sustainable message we take from McDonaldization is also to look to what is *not* being McDonaldized, and potentially seek ways to preserve it.

Consuming or consumed?

George Ritzer has perpetually highlighted the changing nature of consumption and production and indeed its fascinating intensification in the postdigital context (Ritzer et al., 2024). At the same time, there are many examples of human resistance now to the uniformity of

McDonaldized food, fashion and education, and attempts to preserve local cultural values, knowledge, products and services. This can be observed in interesting ways across global cultures where, in the example of China, a process of Disneyfication has gained momentum, giving rise to challenges 'such as blurring boundaries between reality and fantasy, leading to cognitive dissonance among city residents' (Zhang, 2024: 873). This is also prominent in the resistance to 'a new postdigital science of education that merges brain biology, advanced data, software and algorithms with commercial and political imperatives' (Williamson, 2019: 82); to mention just a few examples.

Perhaps in our concluding comments, then, we might draw something of a postdigital parallel between what appear to be moves away from the uniformity of McDonaldization, in both physical and virtual spaces, informational and biological realms. The more diverse the consumption experience becomes, the more the ideological power of consumer capitalism seems to be reinforced, and heterogeneity brings with it conformity and homogeneity (Ritzer and Miles, 2019: 17), followed by a plethora of ethical, practical and other issues.

Yet postdigital consumption across different physical and digital spaces and in bioinformational forms is increasingly hard for people to question or resist. Humans and data have become intertwined, giving rise for the primary components of McDonaldization to be examined alongside the key tenets of HDI (Hayes et al., 2023). As Ritzer (in Ritzer et al., 2024: 4) points out, there is now a 'subordination of human intelligence to artificial intelligence' which is more difficult to counter 'because of its invisibility and the fact that it lies at the base of all sorts of new and yet-to-be-developed technologies'. It seems that McDonaldization is inseparable from our current versions of capitalism – and its consideration is hugely important for building the society of tomorrow.

The McDonaldization thesis itself is still being consumed and produced in equal measure. There have been countless variations and evolutions of the concept applied in different geographical, physical, virtual and integrated postdigital contexts, over many decades. This trend is likely to continue, not least because we agree with Ritzer and Miles (2019) that, 'at least for the foreseeable future, the consumption system cannot function, or even make any sense, without consumers'.

Having the privilege to interview Ritzer twice in a period of seven years (see Ritzer et al., 2018, 2024), we have witnessed his vitality and permanent reinvention of the McDonaldization theory in new contexts. Taking Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis in conversation with some urgent questions of the day, we celebrate George Ritzer's career and the lasting endurance of his work. Most importantly, we stress the importance of the McDonaldization thesis for building a more just and a more sustainable future.

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1. See https://gdpr-info.eu/ (accessed 4 April 20).

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