

December 2006

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Recommended Citation

Jain, Abhijit, "Automating the Bureaucracy: Using McDonaldization Theory to comprehend the future evolution of E-Government" (2006). *AMCIS 2006 Proceedings*. 288.
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2006/288>

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Automating the Bureaucracy: Using McDonaldization Theory to comprehend the future evolution of E-Government

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ABSTRACT

Sociologist George Ritzer has written extensively on the phenomenon of ‘McDonaldization’ occurring in various facets of the American life experience, and increasingly around the world. This paper posits that the current interest in E-Government may be considered a new front in the trend towards McDonaldization, in this case the McDonaldization of government. Concepts from Ritzer's theory are used to demonstrate why E-Government may be considered an effort to foster McDonaldization of government; and to explore what this may mean for the future of government. It is proposed that McDonaldization can serve as a useful paradigm and framework for E-Government research; and that by familiarizing themselves with Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis, researchers in E-Government should be able to glean useful insights that can help them during the course of their research.

Keywords

McDonaldization Theory, E-Government, Society, Formalization.

INTRODUCTION

Sociologist George Ritzer (1993, 1998) has written extensively on the phenomenon of ‘McDonaldization’ occurring in various facets of the American life experience, and increasingly around the world. According to Ritzer, McDonaldization refers to the proliferation of a consumer culture that is propagated by, and owes its success to, the following four dimensions:

- **Efficiency:** E.g., increasing speed and lowering cost of service.
- **Calculability:** E.g., using quantity as a proxy for quality (e.g., a larger hamburger is a better hamburger).
- **Predictability:** E.g., assuring customers of uniformity of products and services, and by avoiding giving surprises to customers.
- **Control:** E.g., by substitution of human by non-human technology and via limited choice offerings.

Education, medical care, tourism, journalism and even sociological theory, according to Ritzer, are some areas of human activity where the trend towards McDonaldization can be perceived.

Ritzer argues that McDonaldization may be seen as a new paradigm of rationalization that has superseded ‘bureaucracy’ as was discussed by Max Weber. Weber had maintained that persistent and heightened formal rationalization of processes in Western society had precipitated the emergence of bureaucratic structures in this society. Ritzer suggests that the hyper-rationality of McDonaldization may simply be a more up-to-date consequence of that same trend.

Although Ritzer laments the McDonaldization of society, this phenomenon should not be thought of as something that has been imposed on society from the outside; McDonaldization must be understood as a consequence of legitimate societal demands and valid organizational efforts to satisfy them. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that, even though it is thriving due to a demand for it and for its considerable advantages, McDonaldization bring along with it substantial negative baggage; especially in the form of what Ritzer refers to as the ‘irrationality of rationality’, i.e. seemingly rational processes that are not necessarily so.

This paper posits that the current interest in E-Government (Note: for the purposes of this paper, E-Government is defined as the use of internet technologies to improve government functioning and to facilitate interactions with citizens) may be considered a new front in the trend towards McDonaldization, in this case the McDonaldization of government. Governments

and citizens alike are keenly interested in the application of new information technologies to make governments more citizen-centric, accessible and responsive. Take, for example, the current interest in E-Voting. This interest in E-Voting is driven by a concern for making voting, a slightly time-consuming and inconvenient task, more convenient for citizens, by allowing them to cast their votes in the comfort of their own homes via the internet. Although it is likely to be a while before true E-Voting systems are implemented, governments around the world have already begun the process of installing a range of applications that allow citizens to fulfill, via online means, a variety of processes that may have formerly required a visit to a government office.

Thus, governments are bowing to new exigencies and demands from citizens to become increasingly citizen-friendly (customer-friendly) and citizen-centric (customer-centric) through the use of information technologies. Therefore, it may be proposed that, in a sense, E-Government is driving the McDonaldization of government. That, government is joining the large sphere of human activity that continues to inexorably become McDonaldized.

In light of this discussion, this paper posits that E-Government researchers may find the McDonaldization paradigm useful in the course of their research. By familiarizing themselves with the McDonaldization thesis, E-Government researchers may place themselves in a position to identify and focus on certain issues that are often seen to emerge out of McDonaldization. Additionally, the four dimensions of McDonaldization offer researchers a framework within which to analyze developments in E-Government.

This paper is organized in the following way. The next section offers a deeper discussion of Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis. The subsequent section explains why E-Government may be considered an effort to foster McDonaldization of government and explores what this may mean for the future of government. The next, i.e. final, section offers concluding remarks on why it may be useful for E-Government researchers to take cognizance of this paper's propositions on the McDonaldization of government.

RITZER'S MCDONALDIZATION THESIS

Ritzer demonstrates that a diverse range of human activity systems can be seen to be getting increasingly McDonaldized. According to him, the McDonaldization paradigm is especially attractive to service industries because they seek to emulate the success of fast food restaurant chains by focusing on the four dimensions identified earlier in the introduction to this paper; namely: efficiency, calculability, predictability and control.

In the tourism industry for example, a tourist on a package tour could visit 7 countries in a week, yet stay in identical hotels, make pre-programmed, scripted site-seeing visits, hobnob only with other tour members and avoid ever meeting an actual native!

People who are conscious about wrinkles on their face can schedule a Botox face-lift during their lunch break, and be back at work minutes later, looking many years younger; a sign that the medical industry too is becoming McDonaldized. In fact, a new phenomenon has taken hold with respect to Botox face-lifts; doctors are organizing Botox parties where people can have a good time and get a face-lift at the same time... this echoes the McDonald's concept of marketing, to children, that a visit to a McDonalds is a fun thing to do.

The popularity of USA Today (the newspaper) is suggestive of McDonaldization of the journalism profession. USA Today likes to present complex news via simplified formats, such as short summaries, dumbed-down statistics and easy to understand graphics (such as color-coded pie-charts). Ritzer describes the USA Today format as consisting of news hamburgers. Similar trends can be seen in the case of news programs on TV.

Of special interest to the readers of this paper would be Ritzer's views on the McDonaldization of education and social science theory.

The McDonaldization of education can be seen in the way universities are trying to make the process of education more convenient for students. Universities are modifying their curricula to offer courses that students find more appealing. Students are assigned textbooks that offer overviews and summaries of entire fields, (somewhat like the USA Today format mentioned earlier) and it is rare for students to be required to read original works. In a rush to increase enrolment, universities are marketing degrees and credentials via television and radio spots; media that are more traditionally associated with mass consumption goods. In the ultimate expression of marrying technological possibility with customer demand, universities are offering online courses. Thus, universities can be seen to be attempting to increase their production of degrees and to make it increasingly easier for students to earn degrees.

Ritzer provides a detailed account of the McDonaldization of American sociological theory. For example, research that involves large samples is more likely to be published than that which involves small samples, because large samples are

supposed to lend themselves to greater generalizability. This is an example of quantity as a proxy for quality, i.e. 'calculability'. McDonald's restaurants propagate the same concept when they offer to super-size a meal or drink for a small additional cost. Another example of the ascendance of calculability is the fact that sociologists are usually judged according to the number of papers they have published. Thus, the field demands increased efficiency from members, who are expected to produce larger numbers of measurable outputs in smaller units of time. This has resulted in a situation wherein functional, positivist research is produced in disproportionately greater numbers than interpretive, ethnographic research, because the last two kinds of research tend to be more time-consuming. Today, journal articles are highly predictable in certain respects. They usually tend to be of a uniform length, and tend to follow a predictable format (i.e. they have an introduction, followed by a literature review, followed by a methodology and results sections, followed by conclusions and limitations). Readers know what to expect and where to expect it. They can quickly predict with great accuracy how long it will take them to read the article, and what they will learn from it. The reviewing process enforces the view that new research should be built upon existing research. Thus article reviewers tend to be experts in their field whose main concern often is whether the new work builds on their own prior work and whether it extends the intellectual tradition they are a part of. Works that do not conform to such expectations are often rejected for being too different, and for not borrowing enough from established traditions. A large number of articles have multiple authors, each of whom has probably contributed to a specialized task (e.g. surveying, statistical analysis) in the final production of the article. Non-human technologies, such as computers, are replacing human technologies. Ritzer suggests that the net result of such McDonaldization of the field of American sociology has been the efficient production of large numbers of unimaginative sociological theories that are uninteresting and explain very little; i.e. research hamburgers. According to him, a large part of the reason for this is the fact that journals require fixed length articles, and that most good theories cannot be effectively presented in such short length articles. He contrasts this with the situation in Europe, where he says that it is more accepted for sociologists to introduce new theories and ideas via full-length books. According to him, this book-length format has permitted European sociologists to contribute far more interesting theories than their American counterparts. According to this view, the well regarded theories of Europeans researchers like Latour, Giddens and Habermas may not have seen development if, like their American counterparts, these sociologists had been expected to produce research hamburgers.

Ritzer criticizes such McDonaldization of society. He asserts that instead of ushering in true rationality, McDonaldization foists a large number of irrationalities in the garb of rationality; something he terms 'the irrationality of rationality'. He argues that McDonaldization allows corporations to exploit consumers more efficiently. For instance, in fast food stores, customers are expected to fill their own beverage glasses, thus becoming unpaid workers. Interestingly, they are even supposed to regard this activity as a fun thing to do. In another example of efficient exploitation of customers, Disney theme parks have essentially become malls for Disney merchandise. People may think they're visiting a theme park, but they're actually visiting a giant mall for Disney branded products. Another example of the 'irrationality of rationality' is the fact that while fast food restaurants offer advantages such as speed of service and low prices, they usually serve food that is largely unimaginative, often tasting like nothing and drawn from a very limited menu of choices. Still another example of 'irrationality of rationality' that Ritzer cites is the creation of a large number of so called 'McJobs' in the McDonaldized economy. Such 'McJobs' usually require a low level of skills to perform a limited number of routine tasks in a robot-like fashion, pay poorly, are highly controlled by non-human technologies and typically lead to high levels of resentment, dissatisfaction, absenteeism, alienation and turnover. Also, Ritzer warns that McDonadization is leading to a decline in segmented and fractionated markets which are being replaced by a mass market in which there are few choices, controlled environments and no surprises.

In light of these criticisms of McDonaldization, it would be useful to consider some of the reasons driving the McDonaldization trend. It has already mentioned earlier that it would be absurd to suggest, as some people do, that the McDonaldization phenomenon is somehow being imposed unwittingly on society due to some secret global conspiracy by greedy corporations. Instead, the McDonaldization phenomenon must be seen as a logical outcome of consumer expectations and organizational efforts to satisfy them. Ritzer offers many such propositions. Perhaps consumers value consistent quality more than the occasional surprise. Perhaps humans are simply averse to uncertainty and unpredictability. Perhaps consumers like the idea of using quantity as a proxy for quality, since quantity can be more easily perceived and judged. Perhaps people like the convenience of having a limited number of choices and the cognitive simplicity it entails. Perhaps people care more for lower prices than for higher quality. Perhaps McDonaldization evolved from bureaucracy because it was better at meeting the demand-supply gap for various products. Perhaps McDonaldization is popular because it leads to better standards of living for the most people.

Reasons underlying the McDonaldization phenomenon have not yet been definitively explicated. Nevertheless, McDonaldization of society is now well recognized as a major theme and trend of our times. Perhaps it is high time for social

science researchers to pay closer attention to Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis in order to incorporate ideas from it into the broader framework of mainstream social science research.

E-GOVERNMENT AND THE MCDONALDIZATION OF GOVERNMENT

Among the various unpleasant tasks that human beings have to perform in course of their daily lives, surely one of them must be the process of dealing with the government. This is reflected in the fact that the word 'bureaucracy', which originally was a value-free description of government administrative structure, has come to acquire a highly negative connotation. When an organization is described as being 'bureaucratic', it now usually means that the organization exhibits a bundle of negative characteristics usually associated with government departments, such as customer-unfriendliness, lack of response to a changing environment and an adherence to processes rather than outcomes. Such perceptions have probably developed over a long period of time during which citizens have experienced frustration from interacting with their governments.

In light of such a history of interactions, new information technologies have given hope to governments and citizens alike that it may be possible to create new forms of interaction and service that can reform government functioning and alleviate some of the past problems. Such new, technology-enabled, forms of interaction and service are collectively referred to as 'E-Government'.

Interestingly, in light of the earlier discussion, E-Government may be seen as an effort to McDonaldize government. Indeed, current E-Government efforts incorporate all the four dimensions of McDonaldization (namely: efficiency, calculability, predictability and control) in abundant measure.

The dimension of calculability is manifested in the methods by which current E-Government efforts are measured and judged. It is vastly more common for E-Government initiatives to be judged through quantitative, rather than qualitative, methods. Metaphorically speaking, most assessments of E-Government progress rely on measuring the number of 'widgets' being produced rather than the quality of 'widgets'. Thus, the quality E-Government websites is usually compared and evaluated on the basis of easily measurable objective attributes such as the number of features available on these websites rather than on the basis of subjective assessments of individual user experiences. E-Government efforts are being judged on the basis of measures such as their cost (Hall et al. 2001), the return on investments from such efforts (Hall et al. 2001)⁶, the increase in worker productivity from them (Lagroue 2001), the quantity of technological infrastructure employed (UNPAN 2001), the quantity of technical manpower employed (UNPAN 2001), the number of features being offered in websites (West 2000), whether websites display a privacy policy (West 2000), whether websites display a security policy (West 2000), whether websites offer disability access (West 2000), the number of days websites take to respond to e-mails (West 2000), website download speeds (DeConti 1998), whether text alternatives to graphical interfaces are available (DeConti 1998) and whether sites display a statement of purpose (DeConti 1998)².

The dimension of efficiency can be evidenced in E-Government strategy documents that usually pitch increased efficiency as a major expected outcome from E-Government (IGB 2003, NOIE 2002, OECD 2003, OMB 2003). According to these documents, efficiencies are expected to arise out of government efforts to use information technology to increase the information processing speed and capacity of government, and efforts to outsource various tasks from the private sector. A focus on efficiency is also seen in efforts to evaluate E-Government projects on basis of cost reductions, returns on investments and productivity gains from such projects, as discussed in the previous paragraph.

The dimensions of predictability and control are evident in the increasing use of technology and automation in order to provide a uniform level of service to citizens. For instance, a large number of E-Government efforts are incorporating the technology of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) in order to automate service delivery (Accenture 2003¹, DeConti 1998, Deloitte Consulting 2002, Deloitte Research 2002, UNPAN 2001). To quote another example, citizens are being invited to participate in online rule making by giving their opinions on proposed laws; thus substituting non-human technology, i.e. the internet, for human technology, i.e. the town hall meeting. Another kind of control is manifest in the way a central technology czar may dictate E-Government policies to all the different agencies that form a government. Such cases often demonstrate an incredibly high degree of institutional imitation, with a certain security or privacy policy getting imitated along an entire chain of government agencies. Predictability is also considered to be an important determinant of citizen trust in E-Government (Gefen 2002).

The apparent push to McDonaldize government should be seen as a logical consequence of citizens' demands, and governmental efforts to meet these demands. Indeed, there are many advantages anticipated from such McDonaldization of government. It is expected that E-Government will lead to faster and better service fulfillment by governments. It is expected that E-Government will lead to more lean government structures that will cost taxpayers less money. And it is expected that objective measures of judging government service performance may prove more useful than subjective methods.

However there are also some potential downsides that should be kept in mind. If, at some future date, government employees find themselves working at 'McJobs', it could spell a disaster for the functioning of government, and in turn for society. The continued digitization and mechanization (i.e. substitution of non-human for human technology) of information also spells considerable privacy concerns. Digital storage of vast amounts of sensitive citizen information will always be a highly risky proposition due to its vulnerability to hacking. Also, technologies such as E-Voting can lend themselves to being abused. Further the reality of the digital divide may mean that technologically-savvy people will end up exploiting government services in a better way than their less technologically-savvy brethren. Finally, just as in the case of mass retailing, McDonaldization of government may force a consolidation of fractionated and diverse client citizen constituencies into mass-constituencies (i.e. convert fractionated markets to mass-markets); and it is not clear what outcomes may result from such an eventuality.

The scope and timetable of many e-government programs is driven by comparisons with commercial online services and by consumer expectations that have been conditioned by experiences with such commercial online services. Yet government organizations and public services are substantially different from the private sector in terms of their scope and mission. Governments are complex machines with a humane core. For illustrative purposes, take the example of child welfare services. We should not be too concerned about conventional notions of efficiency and calculability when a child is in a potentially threatening environment. We might not, even, be too concerned with predictability, for presumably every case is unique and should be dealt with as such. Not everything can or should be automated, professional workers are necessary for executing certain functions. Nevertheless, better information can certainly support workers' efforts. Thus, if the push towards e-government inexorably pushes government organizations towards McDonaldization, then researchers must be concerned with how the focus on efficiency, calculability and predictability has the potential to disrupt and undermine the humane core and the scope and mission of government in certain ways, while concomitantly supporting them in other ways.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper offers preliminary findings and has sought to establish that the McDonaldization paradigm offered by Ritzer is a useful perspective with which to understand the current interest in E-Government. The concept of E-Government may be comprehended as an effort to McDonaldize government. By familiarizing themselves with Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis, researchers in E-Government should be able to glean useful insights that can help them with their research.

For instance, E-Government researchers may find it useful to become cognizant of the problems of so-called 'McJobs' and to explore the potential human resource development issues that may result from McDonaldization of government.

Some organizations in highly McDonaldized industries such as the fast food industry have been quite successful at offering mass-customization to their customers (e.g. Subway). Perhaps E-Government researchers may find it useful to examine such organizations to study the potential for E-Government systems to offer mass-customized services.

If, as discussed earlier, it is true that McDonaldization of government may force a consolidation of fractionated and diverse client citizen constituencies into mass-constituencies (i.e. convert fractionated markets to mass-markets), then E-Government researchers would be well advised to expend considerable energies in order to understand what outcomes may result from such an eventuality.

Finally, E-Government researchers should keep in mind that McDonaldization is a modern, contemporary form of Weberian bureaucracy; a hyper-rational form of bureaucracy or a more 'bureaucratic' form of bureaucracy. Since 'bureaucracy' has come to acquire a bad reputation in contemporary society, it may imply that McDonaldized government in the form of E-Government could acquire a much worse reputation in the future. It is not difficult to conceive of a future scenario wherein citizens get frustrated because they never come in contact with a human face of government and instead are directed to only deal with 'robots' in the form of websites and web-servers.

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