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An Introduction to McDonaldization

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Ray Kroc (1902–1984), the genius behind the franchising of McDonald’s restaurants, was a man with big ideas and grand ambitions. But even Kroc could not have anticipated the astounding impact of his creation. McDonald’s is the basis of one of the most influential developments in contemporary society. Its reverberations extend far beyond its point of origin in the United States and in the fast-food business. It has influenced a wide range of undertakings, indeed the way of life, of a significant portion of the world. And having rebounded from some well-publicized economic difficulties, that impact is likely to expand at an accelerating rate in the early 21st century.

However, this is not a book about McDonald’s, or even about the fast-food business, although both will be discussed frequently throughout these pages. I devote all this attention to McDonald’s (as well as to the industry of which it is a part and that it played such a key role in spawning) because it

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serves here as the major example of, and the paradigm for, a wide-ranging process I call *McDonaldization*—that is,

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.

McDonaldization has shown every sign of being an inexorable process, sweeping through seemingly impervious institutions (e.g., religion) and regions (European nations such as France) of the world.

The success of McDonald's itself is apparent: In 2006, its revenues were \$21.6 billion, with operating income of \$4.4 billion. McDonald's, which first began operations in 1955, had 31,667 restaurants throughout the world at the beginning of 2007. Martin Plimmer, a British commentator, archly notes:

There are McDonald's everywhere. There's one near you, and there's one being built right now even nearer to you. Soon, if McDonald's goes on expanding at its present rate, there might even be one in your house. You could find Ronald McDonald's boots under your bed. And maybe his red wig, too.

McDonald's and McDonaldization have had their most obvious influence on the restaurant industry and, more generally, on franchises of all types:

1. According to the International Franchise Association, there were 767,483 small franchised businesses in the United States in late 2006, and they did about \$1.5 trillion in annual sales. They employed more than 18 million people. Franchises are growing rapidly; over 57% of McDonald's restaurants are franchises. McDonald's invested in a Denver chain, Chipotle, in 1998 and became its biggest investor in 2001. At the time, Chipotle had 15 stores. By the time McDonald's divested itself of its interest in the company on October 13, 2006, there were over 500 Chipotle restaurants. (Starbucks, the current star of the fast-food industry, interestingly refuses to franchise its operations.)

2. In the restaurant industry, the McDonald's model has been adopted not only by other budget-minded hamburger franchises, such as Burger King and Wendy's, but also by a wide array of other low-priced fast-food businesses. As of the beginning of 2007, Yum! Brands, Inc. operated 34,277 restaurants in over 100 countries under the Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Taco Bell, A&W Root Beer, and Long John Silver's franchises. Yum! Brands has more outlets than McDonald's, although its total sales (\$9.5 billion in 2006) is not nearly as high. Subway (with over 27,000 outlets

in 85 countries) is one of the fastest-growing fast-food businesses and claims to be—and may actually be—the largest restaurant chain in the United States. The Cleveland, Ohio, market, to take one example, is so saturated with Subway restaurants (over 100 of them) that one opened recently *inside* the Jewish Community Center.

3. The McDonald's model has been extended to casual dining—that is, more upscale, higher-priced chain restaurants with fuller menus (for example, Outback Steakhouse, Chili's, Olive Garden, Cheesecake Factory, and Red Lobster). Morton's is an even more upscale, high-priced chain of steakhouses that has overtly modeled itself after McDonald's: "Despite the fawning service and the huge wine list, a meal at Morton's conforms to the same dictates of uniformity, cost control and portion regulation that have enabled American fast-food chains to rule the world." In fact, the chief executive of Morton's was an owner of a number of Wendy's outlets and admits: "My experience with Wendy's has helped in Morton's venues." To achieve uniformity, employees go "by the book": "an ingredient-by-ingredient illustrated binder describing the exact specifications of 500 Morton's kitchen items, sauces and garnishes. A row of color pictures in every Morton's kitchen displays the presentation for each dish."

4. Other types of business are increasingly adapting the principles of the fast-food industry to their needs. Said the vice chairman of Toys "R" Us, "We want to be thought of as a sort of McDonald's of toys." (Interestingly, Toys "R" Us is now in decline because of its inability to compete with the even more McDonaldized Wal-Mart and its toy business.) The founder of Kidsports Fun and Fitness Club echoed this desire: "I want to be the McDonald's of the kids' fun and fitness business." Other chains with similar ambitions include Gap, Jiffy Lube, AAMCO Transmissions, Midas Muffler & Brake Shops, Great Clips, H&R Block, Pearle Vision, Bally's, Kampgrounds of America (KOA), KinderCare (dubbed "Kentucky Fried Children"), Jenny Craig, Home Depot, Barnes & Noble, and PETsMART. Curves, the world's largest chain of women's fitness centers, was founded in 1995, and by 2007 there were an astounding 10,000 of them in 44 countries.

5. As we will see throughout this book, it is possible to view a wide range of the most contemporary phenomena as being affected directly or indirectly by the McDonald's model (and McDonaldization). Among them are text messaging, multitasking, mobile cell phone use and entertainment (e.g., Mobizzo), iPods, MySpace, YouTube, online dating (e.g., match.com), Viagra, virtual vacations, and extreme sports.

6. McDonald's has been a resounding success in the international arena. Over half of McDonald's restaurants are outside the United States (in the mid-1980s, only 25% of McDonald's were outside the United States). The majority (233) of the 280 new restaurants opened in 2006 were overseas (in the United States, the number of restaurants increased by only 47). Well over half of the revenue for McDonald's comes from its overseas operations. McDonald's restaurants are now found in 118 nations around the world, serving 50 million customers a day. The leader by far, as of the beginning of 2007, is Japan with 3,828 restaurants, followed by Canada with over 1,375 and Germany with over 1,200. There are currently 780 McDonald's restaurants in China (but Yum! Brands operates over 2,000 KFCs—the Chinese greatly prefer chicken to beef—and 300 Pizza Huts in China). McDonald's has added 100 new restaurants a year in China and had a goal of 1,000 restaurants by the opening of the 2008 Beijing Olympics (but KFC added 400 a year!). As of 2006, there were 155 McDonald's in Russia, and the company plans to open many more restaurants in the former Soviet Union and in the vast new territory in Eastern Europe that has been laid bare to the invasion of fast-food restaurants. Although there have been recent setbacks for McDonald's in Great Britain, that nation remains the "fast-food capital of Europe," and Israel is described as "McDonaldized," with its shopping malls populated by "Ace Hardware, Toys "R" Us, Office Depot, and TCBY."

7. Many highly McDonaldized firms outside the fast-food industry have also had success globally. Although most of Blockbuster's 9,000-plus sites are in the United States, about 2,000 of them are found in 24 other countries. Wal-Mart is the world's largest retailer with 1.8 million employees and over \$312 billion in sales. There are almost 4,000 of its stores in the United States (as of 2006). It opened its first international store (in Mexico) in 1991; it now has more than 2,700 units in Puerto Rico, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Brazil, China, Korea, Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom. In any given week, more than 175 million customers visit Wal-Mart stores worldwide.

8. Other nations have developed their own variants on the McDonald's chain. Canada has a chain of coffee shops called Tim Hortons (merged with Wendy's in 1995), with 2,711 outlets (336 in the United States). It is Canada's largest food service provider with nearly twice as many outlets as McDonald's in that country. The chain has 62% of the coffee business (Starbucks is a distant second with just 7% of that business). Paris, a city whose love for fine cuisine might lead you to think it would prove immune to fast food, has a large number of fast-food *croissanteries*; the revered French bread has also been McDonaldized. India has a chain of fast-food

restaurants, Nirula's, that sells mutton burgers (about 80% of Indians are Hindus, who eat no beef) as well as local Indian cuisine. Mos Burger is a Japanese chain with over 1,600 restaurants that, in addition to the usual fare, sell Teriyaki chicken burgers, rice burgers, and "Oshiruko with brown rice cake." Perhaps the most unlikely spot for an indigenous fast-food restaurant, war-ravaged Beirut of 1984, witnessed the opening of Juicy Burger, with a rainbow instead of golden arches and J. B. the Clown standing in for Ronald McDonald. Its owners hoped it would become the "McDonald's of the Arab world." In the immediate wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, clones of McDonald's (sporting names like "MaDonal" and "Matbax") opened in that country complete with hamburgers, french fries, and even golden arches.

9. And now McDonalidization is coming full circle. Other countries with their own McDonalidized institutions have begun to export them to the United States. The Body Shop, an ecologically sensitive British cosmetics chain, had, as of 2006, over 2,100 shops in 55 nations, 300 of them in the United States. American firms have followed the lead and opened copies of this British chain, such as Bath & Body Works. Pret A Manger, a chain of sandwich shops that also originated in Great Britain (interestingly, McDonald's purchased a 33% minority share of the company in 2001), has over 150 company-owned and -run restaurants, mostly in the United Kingdom but now also in New York, Hong Kong, and Tokyo. Pollo Campero was founded in Guatemala in 1971 and by mid-2006 had more than 200 restaurants in Latin America and the United States. In the latter, 23 restaurants were in several major cities, and the company planned to open 10 more in such cities by the end of 2006. (Jollibee, a Philippine chain, has 10 U.S. outlets.) Though Pollo Campero is a smaller presence in the United States than the American-owned Pollo Tropical chain (which has 80 U.S. outlets), Pollo Campero is more significant because it involves the invasion of the United States, the home of fast food, by a foreign chain.

10. IKEA (more on this important chain later), a Swedish-based (but Dutch-owned) home furnishings company, did about 17.6 billion euros of business in 2006, derived from the over 410 million people visiting their 251 stores in 34 countries. Purchases were also made from the 160 million copies of their catalog printed in over 44 languages. In fact, that catalog is reputed to print annually the second largest number of copies in the world, just after the Bible. IKEA's Web site features over 12,000 products and reported over 125 million "hits" in 2006. Another international chain to watch in the coming years is H&M clothing, founded in 1947 and now operating 1,345 stores in 24 countries with plans to open another 170 stores

by the end of 2007. It currently employs over 60,000 people and sells more than 500 million items a year. Based in Spain, Inditex Group, whose flagship store is Zara, overtook H&M in March 2006 to become Europe's largest fashion retailer with more than 3,100 stores in 64 countries.

11. Much of the above emphasizes the spatial expansion of McDonald's and other McDonaldized businesses, but in addition they have all expanded temporally. McDonald's is shifting its focus from adding locations to adding hours to existing locales, therefore squeezing greater profits from each of them. For example, McDonald's did not at first offer breakfast, but now that meal has become the most important part of the day, and McDonald's dominates the fast-food breakfast market (although Starbucks is seeking to challenge its preeminence). There is also a trend toward remaining open on a 24/7 basis. While less than 1% of McDonald's restaurants operated nonstop in 2002, almost 40% were operating that way by late 2006. Time, like space, is no barrier to the spread of McDonald's and McDonaldization.

McDonald's as a Global Icon

McDonald's has come to occupy a central place in American popular culture, not just the business world. The opening of a new McDonald's in a small town can be an important social event. Said one Maryland high school student at such an opening, "Nothing this exciting ever happens in Dale City." Even big-city and national newspapers avidly cover developments in the fast-food business.

Fast-food restaurants also play symbolic roles on television programs and in the movies. A skit on the legendary television show *Saturday Night Live* satirized specialty chains by detailing the hardships of a franchise that sells nothing but Scotch tape. In the movie *Coming to America* (1988), Eddie Murphy plays an African prince whose introduction to America includes a job at "McDowell's," a thinly disguised McDonald's. In *Falling Down* (1993), Michael Douglas vents his rage against the modern world in a fast-food restaurant dominated by mindless rules designed to frustrate customers. *Moscow on the Hudson* (1984) has Robin Williams, newly arrived from Russia, obtain a job at McDonald's. H. G. Wells, a central character in the movie *Time After Time* (1979), finds himself transported to the modern world of a McDonald's, where he tries to order the tea he was accustomed to drinking in Victorian England. In *Sleeper* (1973), Woody Allen awakens in the future only to encounter a McDonald's. *Tin Men* (1987) ends

with the early 1960s heroes driving off into a future represented by a huge golden arch looming in the distance. *Scotland, PA* (2001) brings *Macbeth* to the Pennsylvania of the 1970s. The famous murder scene from the Shakespeare play involves, in this case, plunging a doughnut king's head into the boiling oil of a deep fat fryer. The McBeths then use their ill-gotten gains to transform the king's greasy spoon café into a fast-food restaurant featuring McBeth burgers. The focus of the movie *Fast Food Nation* (2006) is a fictional fast-food chain ("Mickey's"), featuring its hit hamburger ("The Big One"), the beef processor that supplies the meat, and the plight of the illegal Mexican immigrants who work there.

Further proof that McDonald's has become a symbol of American culture is to be found in what happened when plans were made to raze Ray Kroc's first McDonald's restaurant. Hundreds of letters poured into McDonald's headquarters, including the following:

Please don't tear it down! . . . Your company's name is a household word, not only in the United States of America, but all over the world. To destroy this major artifact of contemporary culture would, indeed, destroy part of the faith the people of the world have in your company.

In the end, the restaurant was rebuilt according to the original blueprints and turned into a museum. A McDonald's executive explained the move: "McDonald's . . . is really a part of Americana."

Americans aren't the only ones who feel this way. At the opening of the McDonald's in Moscow, one journalist described the franchise as the "ultimate icon of Americana." When Pizza Hut opened in Moscow in 1990, a Russian student said, "It's a piece of America." Reflecting on the growth of fast-food restaurants in Brazil, an executive associated with Pizza Hut of Brazil said that his nation "is experiencing a passion for things American." On the popularity of Kentucky Fried Chicken in Malaysia, the local owner said, "Anything Western, especially American, people here love. . . . They want to be associated with America."

One could go further and argue that in at least some ways McDonald's has become more important than the United States itself. Take the following story about a former U.S. ambassador to Israel officiating at the opening of the first McDonald's in Jerusalem wearing a baseball hat with the McDonald's golden arches logo:

An Israeli teen-ager walked up to him, carrying his own McDonald's hat, which he handed to Ambassador Indyk with a pen and asked: "Are you the Ambassador? Can I have your autograph?" Somewhat sheepishly, Ambassador Indyk replied: "Sure. I've never been asked for my autograph before."

As the Ambassador prepared to sign his name, the Israeli teen-ager said to him, “Wow, what’s it like to be the ambassador from McDonald’s, going around the world opening McDonald’s restaurants everywhere?”

Ambassador Indyk looked at the Israeli youth and said, “No, no. I’m the American ambassador—not the ambassador from McDonald’s!” Ambassador Indyk described what happened next: “I said to him, ‘Does this mean you don’t want my autograph?’ And the kid said, ‘No, I don’t want your autograph,’ and he took his hat back and walked away.”

Two other indices of the significance of McDonald’s (and, implicitly, McDonaldization) are worth mentioning. The first is the annual “Big Mac Index” (part of “burgernomics”), published, tongue-in-cheek, by a prestigious magazine, the *Economist*. It indicates the purchasing power of various currencies around the world based on the local price (in dollars) of the Big Mac. The Big Mac is used because it is a uniform commodity sold in many different nations. In the 2007 survey, a Big Mac in the United States cost an average of \$3.22; in China it was \$1.41; in Switzerland it cost \$5.50; the costliest was \$7.44 in Iceland. This measure indicates, at least roughly, where the cost of living is high or low, as well as which currencies are undervalued (China) and which are overvalued (Switzerland). Although the *Economist* is calculating the Big Mac Index only half-seriously, the index represents the ubiquity and importance of McDonald’s around the world.

The second indicator of the global significance of McDonald’s is the idea developed by Thomas Friedman that “no two countries that both have a McDonald’s have ever fought a war since they each got McDonald’s.” Friedman calls this the “Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention.” Another tongue-in-cheek idea, it implies that the path to world peace lies through the continued international expansion of McDonald’s. Unfortunately, it was proved wrong by the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, which had McDonald’s at the time (as of 2007, there are sixteen McDonald’s there).

To many people throughout the world, McDonald’s has become a sacred institution. At that opening of the McDonald’s in Moscow, a worker spoke of it “as if it were the Cathedral in Chartres, . . . a place to experience ‘celestial joy.’” Kowinski argues that indoor shopping malls, which almost always encompass fast-food restaurants, are the modern “cathedrals of consumption” to which people go to practice their “consumer religion.” Similarly, a visit to another central element of McDonaldized society, Walt Disney World, has been described as “the middle-class hajj, the compulsory visit to the sunbaked holy city.”

McDonald’s has achieved its exalted position because virtually all Americans, and many others, have passed through its golden arches (or by

its drive-through windows) on innumerable occasions. Furthermore, most of us have been bombarded by commercials extolling the virtues of McDonald's, commercials tailored to a variety of audiences and that change as the chain introduces new foods, new contests, and new product tie-ins. These ever-present commercials, combined with the fact that people cannot drive very far without having a McDonald's pop into view, have embedded McDonald's deeply in popular consciousness. A poll of school-age children showed that 96% of them could identify Ronald McDonald, second only to Santa Claus in name recognition.

Over the years, McDonald's has appealed to people in many ways. The restaurants themselves are depicted as spick-and-span, the food is said to be fresh and nutritious, the employees are shown to be young and eager, the managers appear gentle and caring, and the dining experience itself seems fun-filled. Through their purchases, people contribute, at least indirectly, to charities such as the Ronald McDonald Houses for sick children.

The Long Arm of McDonaldization

McDonald's strives continually to extend its reach within American society and beyond. As the company's chairman said, "Our goal: to totally dominate the quick service restaurant industry worldwide. . . . I want McDonald's to be more than a leader. I want McDonald's to dominate."

McDonald's began as a phenomenon of suburbs and medium-sized towns, but later it moved into smaller towns that supposedly could not support such a restaurant and into many big cities that were supposedly too sophisticated. Today, you can find fast-food outlets in New York's Times Square as well as on the Champs-Élysées in Paris. Soon after it opened in 1992, the McDonald's in Moscow's Pushkin Square sold almost 30,000 hamburgers a day and employed a staff of 1,200 young people working two to a cash register. In early 1992, Beijing witnessed the opening of what still may be the world's largest McDonald's, with 700 seats, 29 cash registers, and nearly 1,000 employees. On its first day of business, it set a new one-day record for McDonald's by serving about 40,000 customers. McDonald's can even be found on Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba and in the Pentagon.

Small, satellite, express, or remote outlets, opened in areas that could not support full-scale fast-food restaurants, are also expanding rapidly. They are found in small storefronts in large cities and in nontraditional settings such as museums, department stores, service stations, and even schools. These satellites typically offer only limited menus and may rely on larger outlets for food storage and preparation. A flap occurred over the placement of a

McDonald's in the new federal courthouse in Boston. Among the more striking sites for a McDonald's restaurant are at the Grand Canyon, in the world's tallest building (Petronas Towers in Malaysia), as a ski-through on a slope in Sweden, and in a structure in Shrewsbury, England, that dates back to the 13th century.

No longer content to dominate the strips that surround many college campuses, fast-food restaurants have moved right onto many of those campuses. The first campus fast-food restaurant opened at the University of Cincinnati in 1973. Today, college cafeterias often look like shopping-mall food courts (and it's no wonder, given that campus food service is a multi-billion-dollar-a-year business). In conjunction with a variety of "branded partners" (for example, Pizza Hut and Subway), Marriott now supplies food to many colleges and universities. The apparent approval of college administrations puts fast-food restaurants in a position to further influence the younger generation.

We no longer need to leave many highways to obtain fast food quickly and easily. Fast food is now available at many, and in some cases all, convenient rest stops along the road. After "refueling," we can proceed with our trip, which is likely to end in another community with about the same density and mix of fast-food restaurants as the locale we left behind. Fast food is also increasingly available in hotels, railway stations, and airports.

In other sectors of society, the influence of fast-food restaurants has been subtler but no less profound. Food produced by McDonald's and other fast-food restaurants has begun to appear in high schools and trade schools; over 50% of school cafeterias offer popular brand-name fast foods such as McDonald's, Pizza Hut, or Taco Bell at least once a week. Said the director of nutrition for the American School Food Service Association, "Kids today live in a world where fast food has become a way of life. For us to get kids to eat, period, we have to provide some familiar items." Few lower-grade schools as yet have in-house fast-food restaurants; however, many have had to alter school cafeteria menus and procedures to make fast food readily available. Apples, yogurt, and milk may go straight into the trash can, but hamburgers, fries, and shakes are devoured. Fast-food restaurants also tend to cluster within walking distances of schools. The attempt to hook school-age children on fast food reached something of a peak in Illinois, where McDonald's operated a program called "A for Cheeseburger." Students who received As on their report cards received a free cheeseburger, thereby linking success in school with McDonald's. In Australia, toy versions of food featured by McDonald's are being marketed to children as young as three. The toys include "fake McDonald's fries, a self-assembling Big Mac,

milkshake, Chicken McNuggets, baked apple pie and mini cookies.” Many fear that playing with such toy food will increase children’s interest in eating the real thing.

The military has also been pressed to offer fast food on both bases and ships. Despite criticisms by physicians and nutritionists, fast-food outlets have turned up inside over 30 U.S. general hospitals and in about 30% of children’s hospitals. Although no private homes yet have a McDonald’s of their own, meals at home often resemble those available in fast-food restaurants. Frozen, microwavable, and prepared foods, which bear a striking resemblance to meals available at fast-food restaurants, often find their way to the dinner table. There are even cookbooks—for example, *Secret Fast Food Recipes: The Fast Food Cookbook*—that allow one to prepare “genuine” fast food at home. Then there is also home delivery of fast foods, especially pizza, as revolutionized by Domino’s.

Another type of expansion involves what could be termed “vertical McDonaldization”; that is, the demands of the fast-food industry, as is well documented in Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation*, have forced industries that service it to McDonaldize in order to satisfy its insatiable demands. Potato growing and processing, cattle ranching, chicken raising, and meat slaughtering and processing have all had to McDonaldize their operations, leading to dramatic increases in production. That growth has not come without costs, however. Meat and poultry are more likely to be disease-ridden, small (often non-McDonaldized) producers and ranchers have been driven out of business, and millions of people have been forced to work in low-paying, demeaning, demanding, and sometimes outright dangerous jobs. For example, in the meatpacking industry, relatively safe, unionized, secure, manageable, and relatively high-paying jobs in firms with once-household names like Swift and Armour have been replaced with unsafe, nonunionized, insecure, unmanageable, and relatively low-paying positions with largely anonymous corporations. While some (largely owners, managers, and stockholders) have profited enormously from vertical McDonaldization, far more have been forced into a marginal economic existence.

McDonald’s is such a powerful model that many businesses have acquired nicknames beginning with Mc. Examples include “McDentists” and “McDoctors,” meaning drive-in clinics designed to deal quickly and efficiently with minor dental and medical problems; “McChild” care centers, meaning child-care centers such as KinderCare; “McStables,” designating the nationwide race horse-training operation of Wayne Lucas; and “McPaper,” describing the newspaper *USA TODAY*.

McDonald’s is not always enamored of this proliferation. Take the case of We Be Sushi, a San Francisco chain with a half-dozen outlets. A note

appears on the back of the menu explaining why the chain was not named “McSushi”:

The original name was McSushi. Our sign was up and we were ready to go. But before we could open our doors we received a very formal letter from the lawyers of, you guessed it, McDonald’s. It seems that McDonald’s has cornered the market on every McFood name possible from McBagle [sic] to McTaco. They explained that the use of the name McSushi would dilute the image of McDonald’s.

So powerful is McDonaldization that the derivatives of McDonald’s, in turn, exert their own powerful influence. For example, the success of *USA TODAY* has led many newspapers across the nation to adopt shorter stories and colorful weather maps. As one *USA TODAY* editor said, “The same newspaper editors who call us McPaper have been stealing our McNuggets.” Even serious journalistic enterprises such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have undergone changes (for example, the use of color) as a result of the success of *USA TODAY*. The influence of *USA TODAY* is blatantly manifested in the *Boca Raton News*, which has been described as “a sort of smorgasbord of snippets, a newspaper that slices and dices the news into even smaller portions than does *USA TODAY*, spicing it with color graphics and fun facts and cute features like ‘Today’s Hero’ and ‘Critter Watch.’” As in *USA TODAY*, stories in the *Boca Raton News* usually start and finish on the same page. Many important details, much of a story’s context, and much of what the principals have to say are cut back severely or omitted entirely. With its emphasis on light news and color graphics, the main function of the newspaper seems to be entertainment.

Curves is a derivative of McDonald’s in the women’s fitness area. Its phenomenal growth led to Cuts Fitness for Men, which began operations in 2003. Its founder said, “I wanted to be the men’s version of Curves, loud and clear.” By 2006 there were over 100 Cuts franchises, with 200 more sold. The franchise has become international, and the first Cuts for women opened in late 2005.

Like virtually every other sector of society, sex has undergone McDonaldization. In the movie *Sleeper*, Woody Allen not only created a futuristic world in which McDonald’s was an important and highly visible element, but he also envisioned a society in which people could enter a machine called an “orgasmatron” to experience an orgasm without going through the muss and fuss of sexual intercourse.

Similarly, real-life “dial-a-porn” allows people to have intimate, sexually explicit, even obscene conversations with people they have never met and probably never will meet. There is great specialization here: Dialing numbers

such as 555-FOXX will lead to a very different phone message than dialing 555-SEXY. Those who answer the phones mindlessly and repetitively follow “scripts” such as, “Sorry, tiger, but your Dream Girl has to go. . . . Call right back and ask for me.” Less scripted are phone sex systems (or Internet chat rooms) that permit erotic conversations between total strangers. The Internet, the webcam, and various Web sites (e.g., *audreylive.com*, Jen ’n Dave) now permit people even to see (though still not touch) the person with whom they are having virtual sex. As Woody Allen anticipated with his *orgasmatron*, “Participants can experience an orgasm without ever meeting or touching one another.”

In a world where convenience is king, disembodied sex has its allure. You don’t have to stir from your comfortable home. You pick up the phone, or log onto the computer and, if you’re plugged in, a world of unheard of sexual splendor rolls out before your eyes.

In New York City, an official called a three-story pornographic center “the McDonald’s of sex” because of its “cookie-cutter cleanliness and compliance with the law.” These examples suggest that no aspect of people’s lives is immune to McDonaldization.

Various pharmaceuticals can be seen as McDonaldizing sex. Viagra (and similar drugs such as Cialis) do this by, for example, making the ability to have sex more predictable. Such drugs also claim to work fast and to last for a long time. MDMA (ecstasy) breaks down social inhibitions for perhaps four hours and tends to increase social (including sexual) connectedness.

The preceding merely represents the tip of the iceberg as far as the long arm of McDonaldization is concerned. A number of scholars have analyzed the McDonaldization of the following:

- Mountain climbing (e.g., reliance on guidebooks to climbing routes)
- Criminal justice system (police profiling, “three strikes and you’re out”)
- Family (quick fixes to family problems in books, TV shows)
- Drug addiction (a simple linear view of the problem and solution)
- Internet (Web browsers homogenizing use and experience)
- Farming (reliance on chemicals and biotechnology)
- Education (standardized curricula, lesson plans)
- Religion (megachurches and their “franchises”)
- Politics (“drive-through democracy”)

The Dimensions of McDonaldization

Why has the McDonald’s model proven so irresistible? Eating fast food at McDonald’s has certainly become a “sign” that, among other things, one is

in tune with the contemporary lifestyle. There is also a kind of magic or enchantment associated with such food and its settings. The focus here, however, is on the four alluring dimensions that lie at the heart of the success of this model and, more generally, of McDonaldization. In short, McDonald's has succeeded because it offers consumers, workers, and managers efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. . . .

Efficiency

One important element of the success of McDonald's is *efficiency*, or the optimum method for getting from one point to another. For consumers, McDonald's (its drive-through is a good example) offers the best available way to get from being hungry to being full. The fast-food model offers, or at least appears to offer, an efficient method for satisfying many other needs, as well. Woody Allen's orgasmatron offered an efficient method for getting people from quiescence to sexual gratification. Other institutions fashioned on the McDonald's model offer similar efficiency in exercising, losing weight, lubricating cars, getting new glasses or contacts, or completing income tax forms. Like their customers, workers in McDonaldized systems function efficiently by following the steps in a pre-designed process.

Calculability

Calculability emphasizes the quantitative aspects of products sold (portion size, cost) and services offered (the time it takes to get the product). In McDonaldized systems, quantity has become equivalent to quality; a lot of something, or the quick delivery of it, means it must be good. As two observers of contemporary American culture put it, "As a culture, we tend to believe deeply that in general 'bigger is better.'" People can quantify things and feel that they are getting a lot of food for what appears to be a nominal sum of money (best exemplified by McDonald's current "Dollar Menu," which played a key role in recent years in leading McDonald's out of its doldrums and to steadily increasing sales). In a recent Denny's ad, a man says, "I'm going to eat too much, but I'm never going to pay too much." This calculation does not take into account an important point, however: The high profit margin of fast-food chains indicates that the owners, not the consumers, get the best deal.

People also calculate how much time it will take to drive to McDonald's, be served the food, eat it, and return home; they then compare that interval to the

time required to prepare food at home. They often conclude, rightly or wrongly, that a trip to the fast-food restaurant will take less time than eating at home. This sort of calculation particularly supports home delivery franchises such as Domino's, as well as other chains that emphasize saving time. A notable example of time savings in another sort of chain is LensCrafters, which promises people "Glasses fast, glasses in one hour." H&M is known for its "fast fashion."

Some McDonaldized institutions combine the emphases on time and money. Domino's promises pizza delivery in half an hour, or the pizza is free. Pizza Hut will serve a personal pan pizza in 5 minutes, or it, too, will be free.

Workers in McDonaldized systems also emphasize the quantitative rather than the qualitative aspects of their work. Since the quality of the work is allowed to vary little, workers focus on things such as how quickly tasks can be accomplished. In a situation analogous to that of the customer, workers are expected to do a lot of work, very quickly, for low pay.

Predictability

McDonald's also offers *predictability*, the assurance that products and services will be the same over time and in all locales. The Egg McMuffin in New York will be, for all intents and purposes, identical to those in Chicago and Los Angeles. Also, those eaten next week or next year will be identical to those eaten today. Customers take great comfort in knowing that McDonald's offers no surprises. People know that the next Egg McMuffin they eat will not be awful, although it will not be exceptionally delicious, either. The success of the McDonald's model suggests that many people have come to prefer a world in which there are few surprises. "This is strange," notes a British observer, "considering [McDonald's is] the product of a culture which honours individualism above all."

The workers in McDonaldized systems also behave in predictable ways. They follow corporate rules as well as the dictates of their managers. In many cases, what they do, and even what they say, is highly predictable.

Control

The fourth element in the success of McDonald's, *control*, is exerted over the people who enter the world of McDonald's. Lines, limited menus, few options, and uncomfortable seats all lead diners to do what management wishes them to do—eat quickly and leave. Furthermore, the drive-through (in some cases, walk-through) window invites diners to leave before they eat. In the Domino's model, customers never enter in the first place.

The people who work in McDonaldized organizations are also controlled to a high degree, usually more blatantly and directly than customers. They are trained to do a limited number of things in precisely the way they are told to do them. This control is reinforced by the technologies used and the way the organization is set up to bolster this control. Managers and inspectors make sure that workers toe the line.

A Critique of McDonaldization: The Irrationality of Rationality

McDonaldization offers powerful advantages. In fact, efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control through nonhuman technology (that is, technology that controls people rather than being controlled by them) can be thought of as not only the basic components of a rational system but also as powerful advantages of such a system. However, rational systems inevitably spawn irrationalities. The downside of McDonaldization will be dealt with most systematically under the heading of the irrationality of rationality; in fact, paradoxically, the irrationality of rationality can be thought of as the fifth dimension of McDonaldization.

Criticism, in fact, can be applied to all facets of the McDonaldizing world. As just one example, at the opening of Euro Disney, a French politician said that it will “bombard France with uprooted creations that are to culture what fast food is to gastronomy.” Although McDonaldization offers many advantages (explained later in this chapter), the book focus is on the great costs and enormous risks of McDonaldization. McDonald’s and other purveyors of the fast-food model spend billions of dollars each year detailing the benefits of their system. Critics of the system, however, have few outlets for their ideas. For example, no one sponsors commercials between Saturday-morning cartoons warning children of the dangers associated with fast-food restaurants.

Nonetheless, a legitimate question may be raised about this critique of McDonaldization: Is it animated by a romanticization of the past, an impossible desire to return to a world that no longer exists? Some critics do base their critiques on nostalgia for a time when life was slower and offered more surprises, when at least some people (those who were better off economically) were freer, and when one was more likely to deal with a human being than a robot or a computer. Although they have a point, these critics have undoubtedly exaggerated the positive aspects of a world without McDonald’s, and they have certainly tended to forget the liabilities associated

with earlier eras. As an example of the latter, take the following anecdote about a visit to a pizzeria in Havana, Cuba, which in some respects is decades behind the United States:

The pizza's not much to rave about—they scrimp on tomato sauce, and the dough is mushy.

It was about 7:30 P.M., and as usual the place was standing-room-only, with people two deep jostling for a stool to come open and a waiting line spilling out onto the sidewalk.

The menu is similarly Spartan. . . . To drink, there is tap water. That's it—no toppings, no soda, no beer, no coffee, no salt, no pepper. And no special orders.

A very few people are eating. Most are waiting. . . . Fingers are drumming, flies are buzzing, the clock is ticking. The waiter wears a watch around his belt loop, but he hardly needs it; time is evidently not his chief concern. After a while, tempers begin to fray.

But right now, it's 8:45 P.M. at the pizzeria, I've been waiting an hour and a quarter for two small pies.

Few would prefer such a restaurant to the fast, friendly, diverse offerings of, say, Pizza Hut. More important, however, critics who revere the past do not seem to realize that we are not returning to such a world. In fact, fast-food restaurants have begun to appear even in Havana (and many more are likely after the death of Fidel Castro). The increase in the number of people crowding the planet, the acceleration of technological change, the increasing pace of life—all this and more make it impossible to go back to the world, if it ever existed, of home-cooked meals, traditional restaurant dinners, high-quality foods, meals loaded with surprises, and restaurants run by chefs free to express their creativity.

It is more valid to critique McDonaldization from the perspective of a conceivable future. Unfettered by the constraints of McDonaldized systems, but using the technological advances made possible by them, people could have the potential to be far more thoughtful, skillful, creative, and well-rounded than they are now. In short, if the world was less McDonaldized, people would be better able to live up to their human potential.

We must look at McDonaldization as both “enabling” and “constraining.” McDonaldized systems enable us to do many things we were not able to do in the past; however, these systems also keep us from doing things we otherwise would do. McDonaldization is a “double-edged” phenomenon. We must not lose sight of that fact, even though this book will focus on the constraints associated with McDonaldization—its “dark side.”

Illustrating the Dimensions of McDonaldization: The Case of IKEA

An interesting example of McDonaldization, especially since it has its roots in Sweden rather than the United States, is IKEA. Its popularity stems from the fact that it offers at very low prices trendy furniture based on well-known Swedish designs. It has a large and devoted clientele throughout the world. What is interesting about IKEA from the point of view of this book is how well it fits the dimensions of McDonaldization. The similarities go beyond that, however. For example, just as with the opening of a new McDonald's, there is great anticipation over the opening of the first IKEA in a particular location. Just the rumor that one was to open in Dayton, Ohio, led to the following statement: "We here in Dayton are peeing our collective pants waiting for the IKEA announcement." IKEA is also a global phenomenon—it is now in 34 countries (including China and Japan) and sells in those countries both its signature products as well as those more adapted to local tastes and interests.

In terms of *efficiency*, IKEA offers one-stop furniture shopping with an extraordinary range of furniture. In general, there is no waiting for one's purchases, since a huge warehouse is attached to each store (one often enters through the warehouse), with large numbers of virtually everything in stock.

Much of the efficiency at IKEA stems from the fact that customers are expected to do a lot of the work:

- Unlike McDonald's, there are relatively few IKEAs in any given area; thus, customers most often spend many hours driving great distances to get to a store. This is known as the "IKEA road trip."
- On entry, customers are expected to take a map to guide themselves through the huge and purposely maze-like store (IKEA hopes, like Las Vegas casinos, that customers will get "lost" in the maze and wander for hours, spending money as they go). There are no employees to guide anyone, but there are arrows painted on the floor that customers can follow on their own.
- Also upon entry, customers are expected to grab a pencil and an order form and to write down the shelf and bin numbers for the larger items they wish to purchase; a yellow shopping bag is to be picked up on entry for smaller items. There are few employees and little in the way of help available as customers wander through the stores. Customers can switch from a shopping bag to a shopping cart after leaving the showroom and entering the marketplace, where they can pick up other smaller items.

- If customers eat in the cafeteria, they are expected to clean their tables after eating. There is even this helpful sign: “Why should I clean my own table? At IKEA, cleaning your own table at the end of your meal is one of the reasons you paid less at the start.”
- Most of the furniture sold is unassembled in flat packages, and customers are expected to load most of the items (except the largest) into their cars themselves. After they get home, they must break down (and dispose) of the packaging and then put their furniture together; the only tool supposedly required is an Allen wrench.
- If the furniture does not fit into your car, you can rent a truck on site to transport it home or have it delivered, although the cost tends to be high, especially relative to the price paid for the furniture.
- To get a catalog, customers often sign up online.

Calculability is at the heart of IKEA, especially the idea that what is offered is at a very low price. Like a McDonald’s “Dollar Menu,” one can get a lot of furniture—a roomful, even a houseful—at bargain prices. As with value meals, customers feel they are getting value for their money. (There is even a large cafeteria offering low-priced food, including the chain’s signature Swedish meatballs and 99-cent breakfasts.) However, as is always the case in McDonaldized settings, low price generally means that the quality is inferior, and it is often the case that IKEA products fall apart in relatively short order. IKEA also emphasizes the huge size of its stores, which often approach 300,000 square feet or about four to five football fields. This mammoth size leads the consumer to believe that there will be a lot of furniture offered (and there is) and that, given the store’s reputation, most of it will be highly affordable.

Of course, there is great *predictability* about any given IKEA—large parking lots, a supervised children’s play area (where IKEA provides personnel, but only because supervised children give parents more time and peace of mind to shop and spend), the masses of inexpensive, Swedish-design furniture, exit through the warehouse and the checkout counters, boxes to take home with furniture requiring assembly, and so on.

An IKEA is a highly *controlled* environment, mainly in the sense that the maze-like structure of the store virtually forces the consumer to traverse the entire place and to see virtually everything it has to offer. If one tries to take a path other than that set by IKEA, one is likely to become lost and disoriented. There seems to be no way out that does not lead to the checkout counter, where you pay for your purchases.

There are a variety of *irrationalities* associated with the rationality of IKEA, most notably the poor quality of most of its products. Although the furniture is purportedly easy to assemble, many are more likely to think of it as “impossible-to-assemble.” Then there are the often long hours required to get to an IKEA, to wander through it, to drive back home, and then to assemble the purchases.

The Advantages of McDonaldization

This discussion of the fundamental characteristics of McDonaldization makes it clear that, despite irrationalities, McDonald’s (and other McDonaldized systems such as IKEA) has succeeded so phenomenally for good, solid reasons. Many knowledgeable people, such as the economic columnist Robert Samuelson, strongly support the McDonald’s business model. Samuelson confesses to “openly worship[ing] McDonald’s,” and he thinks of it as “the greatest restaurant chain in history.” In addition, McDonald’s offers many praiseworthy programs that benefit society, such as its Ronald McDonald Houses, which permit parents to stay with children undergoing treatment for serious medical problems; job-training programs for teenagers; programs to help keep its employees in school; efforts to hire and train the handicapped; the McMasters program, aimed at hiring senior citizens; an enviable record of hiring and promoting minorities; and a social responsibility program with goals of improving the environment and animal welfare.

The process of McDonaldization also moved ahead dramatically undoubtedly because it has led to positive changes. Here are a few specific examples of such changes:

- A wider range of goods and services is available to a much larger portion of the population than ever before.
- Availability of goods and services depends far less than before on time or geographic location; people can now do things, such as text message, e-mail, arrange dates online, and participate in MySpace, in the middle of the night, activities that were impossible before.
- People are able to acquire what they want or need almost instantaneously and get it far more conveniently.
- Goods and services are of a far more uniform quality; at least some people even get better-quality goods and services than before McDonaldization.

- Far more economical alternatives to high-priced, customized goods and services are widely available; therefore, people can afford things (e.g., virtual vacations via the Internet rather than actual vacations) they could not previously afford.
- Fast, efficient goods and services are available to a population that is working longer hours and has fewer hours to spare.
- In a rapidly changing, unfamiliar, and seemingly hostile world, the comparatively stable, familiar, and safe environment of a McDonaldized system offers comfort.
- Because of quantification, consumers can more easily compare competing products.
- Certain products (for example, exercise and diet programs) are safer in a carefully regulated and controlled system.
- People are more likely to be treated similarly, no matter what their race, sex, sexual orientation, or social class.
- Organizational and technological innovations are more quickly and easily diffused through networks of identical operators.
- The most popular products of one culture are more easily disseminated to others.

What Isn't McDonaldized?

This chapter should give you a sense of McDonaldization and of the range of phenomena to be discussed throughout this book. In fact, such a wide range of phenomena can be linked to McDonaldization that you may begin to wonder what isn't McDonaldized. Is McDonaldization the equivalent of modernity? Is everything contemporary McDonaldized?

Although much of the world has been McDonaldized, at least three aspects of contemporary society have largely escaped the process:

- Those aspects traceable to an earlier, “premodern” age. A good example is the mom-and-pop grocery store.
- New businesses that have sprung up or expanded, at least in part, as a reaction against McDonaldization. For instance, people fed up with McDonaldized motel rooms in Holiday Inns or Motel 6s can stay instead

in a bed-and-breakfast, which offers a room in a private home with personalized attention and a homemade breakfast from the proprietor.

- Those aspects suggesting a move toward a new, “postmodern” age. For example, in a postmodern society, “modern” high-rise housing projects would make way for smaller, more livable communities.

Thus, although McDonaldization is ubiquitous, there is more to the contemporary world than McDonaldization. It is a very important social process, but it is far from the only process transforming contemporary society.

Furthermore, *McDonaldization is not an all-or-nothing process*. There are degrees of McDonaldization. Fast-food restaurants, for example, have been heavily McDonaldized, universities moderately McDonaldized, and mom-and-pop grocers only slightly McDonaldized. It is difficult to think of social phenomena that have escaped McDonaldization totally, but some local enterprise in Cuba or Fiji may yet be untouched by this process.

Thinking Critically

1. Is there really any such thing as McDonaldization?
 2. Is McDonald's the best example of McDonaldization? In light of its problems, and the rise of Starbucks, would the latter now be a better example? Should we relabel the process “Starbuckization”?
 3. Is the fast food-restaurant really as important as is suggested here?
 4. Can you think of any other dimensions of McDonaldization?
 5. Can rationality ever really be irrational?
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This chapter, from The McDonaldization of Society, deals with the precursors to the fast-food restaurant and the concept of McDonaldization. The key figure in this history is the German social theorist Max Weber (1864–1920), who pioneered the contemporary sociological conception of the bureaucracy and created the best-known theory of rationalization. The bureaucracy was the paradigm for the rationalization process in Weber’s day. That process is described here using the same dimensions as were used in Chapter 1 to define the essence of McDonaldization. This should not be surprising because my theory of McDonaldization is based on, and closely related to, Weber’s theory of rationalization. One key difference, however, is that whereas Weber focused largely on production, the focus of McDonaldization is consumption, which has come to rival, even exceed, the importance of production, especially in highly developed nations like the United States. It is this that leads to the conclusion that the fast-food restaurant, whose home is obviously in the realm of consumption, is a better paradigm today for the rationalization or McDonaldization of society than the bureaucracy.

I also explore Weber’s famous idea that rationalization (now McDonaldization) creates an “iron cage” from which it is increasingly difficult for us to escape. Although this continues to be a useful image, I reexamine it in Chapter 3, which offers another way of thinking about the structure of McDonaldization.
