The McDonaldization of America

Speaker: Beverly Bethune

Max Weber feared that as a society became more industrialized it would attempt to become more rationalized – increasing the same in the name of greater efficiency. Weber thought that increased rationalization would in turn lead to increased bureaucracy and anonymity within the society. His work was heavily influenced by the Industrial Revolution and the changes he saw occurring around the turn of the 20th century.

In 1995, George Ritzer brought these Weberian concepts forward into the late 20th century in a book entitled “The McDonaldization of Society.” He believed that Weber’s fears for society and the affect of rationalization appeared to have merit.

Ritzer examined the world of fast food dominated by McDonald’s. He identified four principles of a process he named McDonaldization. Those principles are:

1. efficiency,
2. calculability,
3. predictability and
4. control through non-human technology.

Ritzer believed the techniques of the fast food industry were creeping more and more into other areas of life.

Efficiency

Weber feared the increase in efficiency would mean a loss of creativity as a trade-off. Ritzer believed he was correct.

McDonald’s serves up millions of burgers all made precisely the same way at all its locations. Each food item sold by McDonald’s arrives at the local franchise from a centralized source. This is an efficient way to ensure the same items will be available in all the outlets, but is a barrier to using local resources or making any variations in size of the burgers.

Calculability

According to Ritzer, our culture is focused more and more on quantity rather than quality in our purchases. We want to “super-size” everything. Items are advertised with emphasis on how much you can get for the money rather than how it tastes. Items are purchased in pre-set sizes and we always assume bigger is better.

Speed is one factor in this calculability. How long will it take us to get through the line to get our desired item? We want faster and faster service. We don’t like waiting and seemingly are willing to trade quality for whatever we can get quickly.
Predictability
Predictability is not always a negative. A certain amount of predictability in our lives is appreciated. When you are driving in your car, it is a comfort to be able to predict which lane others will be driving in! However, in the McDonaldized system, the predictability factor has removed options for creativity. There are very few, if any, variations in the fast food franchises menu from one location to another. Customers with limited funds will go to a “sure bet” when visiting other communities rather than risking their money on a locally owned, but unknown, option.

Control through non-human technology
A McDonaldized system is set up to control the customer. The goal is to get the customer in the store – to the product – and out again as quickly as possible. In order to accomplish this, barriers are put in place to keep customers from wandering or staying too long. Ever see any comfortable chairs arranged around a reading area in a McDonald’s? Even drive-up windows are set up in a way that allows an efficient flow of traffic around the store. There is little to no personal interaction between customer and employee. In fact, that customer may never see that same employee again since schedules change and workers do not always stay long at the same position.

This lack of interaction is an example of Weber’s fears concerning increased anonymity arising from an increasingly rationalized system. It truly does not matter who you are as customer or employee as long as the system is working.

These principles have proven very successful for the myriad of fast food businesses in our culture and around the world. The effect on our culture does not end with successful businesses, however. How have these principles crept into other areas of life? Consider other chain stores you know. How many of those are built, decorated and stocked exactly the same in each location? How many even use centrally purchased decorations for holidays and corporate determined decorating schemes? Do any of those businesses encourage building relationships with customers to attract business?

In a culture built on the diverse contributions of various immigrant groups over time and the development of innovative technology, what will be the long-term effect of increased McDonaldization?

© Beverly Bethune and Indian Hills Community College