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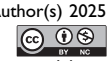

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The AI-ization of society and cultural management through a McDonaldization lens

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Abstract

This essay revisits George Ritzer's concept of the McDonaldization of society, defined by the principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control, and examines its renewed relevance in the age of artificial intelligence (AI). Originally grounded in critiques of the fast-food industry and pervasive effects on society, McDonaldization has extended its reach across various sectors, including education, healthcare, consumption, religion, and sexuality. AI's rationalizing logic mirrors that of fast-food models, restructuring processes while limiting individuality and agency. As AI systems increasingly operate with autonomy, the essay raises concerns about the erosion of human oversight and the rise of decision-making processes devoid of human values. By situating AI within the McDonaldization framework, the essay provides a critical lens for assessing the social and ethical implications of automation, especially in light of its growing role in shaping institutional practices and daily life. McDonaldization thus emerges not only as a historical critique but as a vital tool for contemporary analysis. This essay emerges from a dialogue between the authors and sociologist George Ritzer on the rapid deployment of AI and its potential for AI-ization, understood here as the process by which AI transforms work practices and everyday life. We examine how this process parallels, intersects with, and in certain respects surpasses McDonaldization, with particular attention to the cultural sector. Furthermore, our argument is that AI technologies not only mirror but also actively accelerate McDonaldizing tendencies in contemporary society, especially through what Ritzer terms the irrationality of rationality; clearly observable in

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the creative industries, where the very concept of creativity is at stake. In the realm of algorithmically generated educational and cultural content, AI promises speed and standardization yet simultaneously risks eroding human creativity, autonomy, and ethical judgment. This discussion focuses on how AI-ization contributes to increasing homogenization, perpetuates cultural bias, and impacts the accessibility, control, and authenticity of cultural production.

Keywords
McDonaldization, artificial intelligence, cultural management, creativity, AI-ization

Introduction

The concept of the McDonaldization of society, first introduced by sociologist George Ritzer (1993) in his book of the same name, provides a critical framework for understanding the increasing rationalization of modern life. Drawing on the model of the fast-food industry, particularly McDonald's, Ritzer outlines four key dimensions of this process: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. These principles, while designed to maximize productivity, have extended far beyond the fast-food industry, reshaping institutions such as education (Hayes et al., 2017), healthcare (Dorsey and Ritzer, 2016), consumption (Ritzer and Ryan, 2003), and even religion (Drane, 2017) and sexuality (Jyrkinen, 2016). It is also important to note the all-important, but often-overlooked, fifth dimension of McDonaldization—the irrationality of rationality. In short, that things become so rational that they end up being irrational. This is especially pronounced in the creative industries, where the very concept of creativity is placed under strain.

This framework is perhaps more relevant than ever as society confronts the rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) across various sectors. AI systems, much like fast-food models, are often celebrated for their ability to deliver faster, measurable, and standardized outcomes. However, when examined through the lens of McDonaldization, the process of AI-ization, through the growing reliance on AI, raises important questions about human agency, creativity, and the potential consequences of automating judgment and decision-making.

Drawing on a dialogue between the authors and sociologist George Ritzer, this essay examines the rapid expansion of AI and considers how the logic of McDonaldization is not only paralleled but actively accelerated by the process of AI-ization—the transformation of work practices and everyday life through AI. We analyze how this phenomenon both mirrors and intersects with McDonaldization, while in certain respects surpassing it, with particular attention to its implications for the cultural sector. AI technologies reinforce systems of efficiency and control, yet risk eroding the very human qualities they are intended to serve. This discussion extends beyond a critique of consumer culture to offer a broader commentary on the rationalization of contemporary life under late modernity, highlighting the implications for cultural management.

In the course of the discussion, the authors drew on Ritzer and Ryan's insights regarding AI and McDonaldization, consistent with their arguments in the forthcoming revised edition of *The McDonaldization of Society* (Ritzer and Ryan, 2026). The central lens is that AI, as a tool of rationalization, embodies and extends the McDonaldizing tendencies of contemporary society. Such a lens is particularly relevant today as AI, and especially generative AI, is able to think for itself and is increasingly integrated into societal structures. From automated decision-making in hiring processes to predictive policing algorithms, and AI-generated educational content, the spread of AI technologies echoes, and arguably accelerates, the same logic that the authors and Ritzer describe. These technologies promise greater speed, accuracy, and efficiency, but they also introduce new concerns regarding autonomy, accountability, and the erosion of human judgment. In this context, McDonaldization serves not only as a historical critique but as a vital contemporary framework for evaluating the social and ethical implications of AI.

The process of the McDonaldization of society

Primarily, it warrants to present an understanding of George Ritzer's work *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993), which serves as the foundational framework for this discussion. This work presents a critical sociological analysis of the rationalization processes shaping modern institutions and everyday life. Ritzer identifies four core dimensions that define McDonaldization: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. These principles, derived from the fast-food industry's operational logic, particularly those of McDonald's, serve as a model for understanding how various sectors of contemporary society are increasingly structured around standardized, streamlined, and impersonal practices. Ritzer argued that while these processes may enhance productivity and consistency, they often do so at the expense of individuality, critical thought, and human creativity.

Ritzer's McDonaldization process (1993) builds directly on Max Weber's (1978) classical sociological theory of rationalization, particularly as articulated in his analysis of bureaucracy and the iron cage of modernity. Weber characterized modern societies as increasingly governed by formal rationality, systems of calculation, efficiency, predictability, and control that prioritize means-end logic over values and tradition. Ritzer extends this conceptual framework by arguing that the fast-food industry, exemplified by McDonald's, epitomizes the contemporary form of rationalization.

In the tenth edition, *The McDonaldization of Society: Into the Digital Age* (2020), Ritzer extends his analysis to contemporary digital technologies, noting that the proliferation of AI, algorithmic decision-making, and platform-based services has deepened and accelerated McDonaldization. These developments further institutionalize rationalization, reinforcing systemic uniformity, automation, and surveillance within (digital) culture and the global social, political, and financial economy.

McDonaldization and AI

This essay makes sense of the intersection between generative AI and the process of McDonaldization, particularly in their shared role as powerful catalysts for social

change. It builds on Ritzer's (Ritzer, 2020; Ritzer et al., 2024) discussion on the McDonaldization in the digital age. While Ryan contends that it may be too soon to proclaim AI as the definitive paradigm for understanding contemporary social forces, it is certainly not too soon to recognize the real possibility of such an outcome. Generative AI, in particular, may not only represent the next stage in McDonaldization but could also signal the emergence of an entirely new paradigm for interpreting the social transformations and challenges of our time.

These principles prompted the three sociologists in question to primarily delineate the distinctions between AI and generative AI. According to Ryan, it is also important to distinguish between AI (which is essentially an advanced form of understood computer technology) from generative AI (which is designed specifically to think for itself, hence generative, and which even its own engineers admit to not fully understanding (Heikkilä, 2024). While AI has existed for several decades, generative AI, systems capable of producing content and thinking in ways that approximate autonomous creativity, is relatively new. Ryan maintained that it is this development that is driving the current surge of interest and debate around AI. Traditional AI represented an advanced form of computation, focused on calculation and problem-solving within predefined parameters. In contrast, generative AI moves beyond computation to generation, enabling machines to produce novel outputs and, in a sense, to think independently, thereby opening entirely new territory in technological and social implications. In line with this, the trajectory of the McDonaldization process lies in the evolving role of machines. Unlike traditional systems, where machines were merely programmed to maximize efficiency through repetitive tasks, AI machines are now designed and trained to generate new information autonomously. This shift marks a significant transformation, as machines move beyond simple automation to actively contribute to innovation, problem-solving, and decision-making processes, fundamentally altering how efficiency and productivity are achieved in contemporary society.

Expanding on this, Ryan argued that AI will, almost by definition, operate in alignment with the principles of McDonaldization, inevitably producing outputs that are themselves highly McDonaldized. In many respects, AI represents the ultimate expression of this process, with McDonaldized systems generating correspondingly McDonaldized results. Furthermore, AI appears to elevate McDonaldization to an entirely new level, reinforcing, rather than disrupting, a model defined by speed, automation, and diminished reliance on human variation.

AI not only enhances the processes of McDonaldization but may also supplant them. Whereas the forces of McDonaldization were historically driven by human innovations, generative AI enables technology itself to innovate, highlighting a key distinction between traditional AI and generative AI.

The process of AI-ization, both epitomizes the dimensions of McDonaldization and has the potential to extend or transform them. By combining efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control with autonomous technological innovation, AI challenges traditional assumptions about human agency, creativity, and oversight, generating both new possibilities and unforeseen complexities.

In view of this, AI and AI-ization can represent a new paradigm in social changes, the same way that McDonald's and McDonaldization could be argued to represent social changes over the past centuries and still very much will continue to do so for the future. AI then, for the time being perhaps, doesn't replace McDonaldization so much as it might be providing a corollary to it.

AI also reinforces the processes of McDonaldization in significant ways. It markedly enhances efficiency. Within the creative sector, it reduces the time required for tasks such as writing, proofreading, translating, innovating, and designing. It has been argued how the rapid acceleration of AI contributes to the marginalization of human creators by eliminating human error and privileging outputs characterized by precision, speed, and standardization, in a distinctly McDonaldized manner. In this process, artistic labor risks further devaluation, exacerbating the already precarious economic conditions faced by many artists; conditions made even more vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic (Visanich and Attard, 2020).

During the conversation that led to this essay, Visanich argued how within the context of artistic labor, the drive for efficiency, uniformity, and predictability may strip cultural production of the spontaneity, imperfection, and unpredictability, which are often underpinnings of artistic value and innovation. As a result, the same systems that promise improvement may inadvertently erode the richness of human expression, reducing creative work to algorithmically optimized outputs that, while technically flawless, risk being culturally homogenized and emotionally detached.

Thus, while human error can be minimized, or even eliminated, through AI-driven processes, this very pursuit of precision can paradoxically produce irrational outcomes. This perspective inevitably foregrounds the risk of humans becoming subordinated to non-human systems. While this trend may be welcomed by many, perhaps even the majority, the deeper cause for alarm lies in the increasing manifestation of what Ritzer terms the irrationality of rationality (Ritzer, 2019).

The concept of the irrationality of rationality highlights a paradox within systems designed to be perfectly rational. In their pursuit of maximum efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control, such systems can produce irrational outcomes. In line with Ritzer's claim, while rational systems aim to streamline processes and reduce uncertainty, they often lead to unintended consequences such as dehumanization, loss of creativity, and reduced individual autonomy. These negative effects reveal how strict adherence to rational principles can ultimately undermine the very goals of efficiency and effectiveness they seek to achieve (Ritzer, 1993).

The critical question, then, is whether AI can address this issue. Does it merely streamline processes, making them faster, cheaper, and more efficient, without altering the underlying structures? Or is it actively reshaping the system itself, potentially in ways that remain poorly understood, particularly in domains such as culture and education? In other words, is AI simply optimizing an existing framework, or is it subtly rewriting the foundational rules that govern it?

The discussion raised the issue of whether society is ultimately striving for greater efficiency, in line with the logic of McDonaldization, or for an expanded space for human creativity, in which case AI may constitute a profound threat. Also, the contribution of AI-ization to predictability remains uncertain. The mechanisms underlying generative

AI are largely opaque, limiting our capacity to anticipate its outputs and warranting careful scrutiny. In terms of calculability, AI represents a clear advancement, enabling faster completion of tasks that extend beyond routine clerical work to encompass creative human endeavors. Moreover, it exemplifies an increased degree of control by non-human technology over human activity.

In the discussion, Ritzer elucidated the significance of approaching AI as a fundamentally non-human technology. Thus, without human intervention, creativity is unlikely to emerge organically from such systems. While careful cultural management could, in theory, nurture human creativity alongside AI, achieving this balance will be a considerable challenge.

The conversation by the authors was focused on how AI offers grand promises, yet whether it can fulfil them remains highly uncertain. Consequently, the growing use and reliance on AI should prompt concern, or at the very least, caution, rather than uncritical celebration.

Homogenization and transformation in arts and culture

Before AI, we were already seeing more homogeneity in arts and culture due to increased McDonaldization and globalization (Ritzer and Ryan, 2004). In effect, one of the most significant cultural consequences of globalization is cultural homogenization**,** the process by which diverse local cultures are increasingly shaped, influenced, and often overshadowed by a dominant global culture, typically Western in origin (Aimie, 2024; Ritzer and Ryan, 2004).

The concept of homogenization is central to understanding the broader cultural implications of McDonaldization. As a result, cultural diversity is often reduced to surface-level differences, while deeper local traditions and unique practices are eroded, commodified, or even erased. This dynamic raise critical concerns about the loss of cultural authenticity and the global spread of a monocultural, which is often Western-centric in its worldview.

The integration of AI into everyday life significantly intensifies the processes of homogenization and McDonaldization by embedding the core principles of efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control into digital infrastructures and cultural production, thereby acting as a catalyst for profound social transformation.

An inevitable question is whether AI opens up new possibilities or does it fall into an inevitable trap of uniformity? McDonaldization represents not just a moment in time, but a social process (by definition, any term ending in -ization represents a process rather than a static moment), one most markedly represented by increased homogenization. Since it is designed to do so, AI is far more likely to reinforce rather than challenge cultural homogeneity.

Visanich made the point that within cultural management, AI is increasingly transforming the curatorial experience in both museums and digital platforms. By analyzing vast datasets, AI can assist curators in identifying patterns, trends, and connections across collections that may not be immediately apparent to human observers. In museums, AI tools can support exhibition design, recommend thematic groupings, and

even generate interpretive content tailored to diverse audiences, enhancing engagement and accessibility. Additionally, AI-driven tools are increasingly being adopted in conservation practices, archival documentation, and automated content creation, marking a significant shift in how cultural organizations conceptualize future sustainability (Akyol and Avcı, 2023). In digital curation, AI algorithms personalize content delivery, optimize user navigation, and predict audience preferences, effectively shaping how cultural and informational materials are encountered and interpreted.

While AI can enhance curatorial practices by improving efficiency, expanding analytical capacities, and personalizing audience experiences, it also raises significant questions concerning authorship and cultural bias. There are various concerns over AI's potential to perpetuate social biases and discrimination (Crawford, 2021). This risk stems primarily from the data used to train machine learning models, which often includes publicly available content such as social media posts. Such datasets can encode and reproduce existing societal prejudices, whether related to race, gender, or other identity categories, thereby embedding these biases into the outputs generated by AI systems (Crawford, 2021).

In view of this, as noted above, there is a growing risk that AI may contribute to the homogenization of interpretive narratives, potentially diminishing the diversity and richness of cultural interpretation. Thus, integration of AI into curatorial work exemplifies a broader tension between technological rationalization and the preservation of human creativity, judgment, and critical interpretation. This issue is closely linked to broader questions regarding the control of information and equitable accessibility. To assess the extent to which the McDonaldization framework developed in this essay can be meaningfully applied to the rise and integration of AI in contemporary society for use in arts and culture, we considered notions of access and democratization.

Accessibility and control

AI has been positioned as something that can supposedly democratize production and access. Arguably, such positions are blind to technological, cultural, physical, linguistic, and other inequalities limiting democratic access. It is also arguably the case that what AI really does is to limit what is available, and especially for whom, rather than expand such options.

Instead of increasing accessibility, AI may actually deepen the divide between those who have access and those who do not. Much like McDonaldization, it is likely that the AI-ization of society will be heavily welcomed by most sectors of global society (at least by those with access to it and the cultural know-how to use it), since it represents greater efficiency (and likely profits for the elite), among other factors.

Although AI is still created by humans, there exists a significant possibility, perhaps even a likelihood that it will increasingly operate independently of human control, at least in part. In light of this, the question of control is likely to remain a significant concern. The assumption that humans will consistently remain in control of such systems is increasingly open to challenge, as the dynamics of technological development and integration suggest a gradual shift in agency.

AI, creativity, and authenticity

The concept of culture, particularly its association with human creativity and symbolic meaning, is highly relevant. An important question is how AI-generated material will reshape culture and how we view creativity, especially now that AI can generate music, art, and writing. Is creativity still something uniquely human, or are we starting to redefine what it means in the age of machines? Ryan emphasizes culture, which, by definition, should be something inherently human.

Culture can be defined in multiple ways, but nearly all of them boil down to an understanding of human creativity, invention, and, most importantly, creation. So, why is that relevant here? Generative AI is arguably the replacement of all of these (with an admittedly worthwhile debate still pending). Generative AI can be used to translate, abbreviate, and handle other tasks in place of a human creator. A generation ago, many of these activities would have been described as cheating, or even plagiarism, in cases where authorship was dishonestly claimed. AI, however, can now create, invent, and even innovate with minimal human creative intervention. From this perspective, generative AI can arguably be seen as the opposite of culture, at least if we hold fast to the human-inspired elements of cultural creation and management. If we define culture as human, then it requires humans to create (beyond the level of inputting code and commands to AI). If we accept anything beyond that definition, then we need to re-define not only culture, but the human experience itself.

In line with this argument, it warrants an argument that AI-generated content often lacks the intentional, reflective, and affective dimensions that characterize traditional human creativity. Instead, it tends to replicate dominant patterns found in training data, reinforcing existing norms, and limiting diversity (Broussard, 2018). Arguing against technochauvinism, the idea that technology is always the answer, Broussard (2018) contends that social problems won't simply disappear in a digitally driven utopia.

Another argument has to do with authenticity. Does the use of AI in cultural spaces diminish creativity and authenticity, especially if AI tools are used to curate exhibitions, generate music, or even write content? In that case, things can become quite generic and standardized. Cultural experiences may feel too polished, or repetitive, or mass produced. There may be a tension between using AI to manage culture efficiently and preserving the raw, unique, and often unpredictable elements that make art and culture meaningful.

By some measures, there is a direct relationship, by definition, between the rise in standardization and the lowering of creativity. The use of technology also most often stands in contrast to authenticity. Technology, at least until the presentation of generative AI, is a tool, and therefore, by definition, not creative. It is a tool that one can use to become more creative, but in the case of generative AI, that creativity is reduced to creative inputs to technology to produce algorithmic outputs, which are therefore arguably non-creative and not authentic, at least by humans.

AI will almost certainly homogenize arts and cultural production, but also in consumption. We are increasingly led to interests, purchases, and consumption by algorithms, which are simultaneously increasingly guided by AI. Sometimes AI is overly inclusive in that it distorts historical realities. Streamlined and diverse and inclusive cannot really be balanced with cultural representations, or, if the argument is that they can,

then it begs the bigger questions of what culture is … and at what level (local, global, glocal, and grobal) and for what purposes (that a culture survives, for tourism, or other purpose). It is important to be inclusive, but without erasing history. The value of social advances is erased when social histories are forgotten.

There are also countless ethical considerations. McDonaldization has certainly been used to predict consumer preferences, but perhaps more blatantly to create them and to influence them. Targeted advertising generated by AI isn't really about helping the consumer see things they might be interested in; it is about getting the consumer to spend more money and buy more stuff (that they likely don't even need). If advertising and marketing raise ethical concerns, and they certainly do, then AI-driven advertising and marketing magnify those concerns.

Regarding cultural management, it remains to be seen if AI will perpetuate or disrupt the commodification of culture associated with McDonaldization. Much depends on how it is used. For example, most forms of culture are controlled by corporate profit-seeking entities who are likely quite happy to embrace generative AI. This is, in no small part, due to the fact that AI reduces the need to pay for human creators, reduces human error (while generating an alarming level of error itself), and, ultimately, for the controlling class, potentially leads to more profits. As culture has already been largely McDonaldized (also, arguably, with a primary purpose of increasing profits), generative AI represents a mechanism to further those gains.

Despite this, Ryan maintains that there is room for some hope. For example, AI led to the discovery of more than 300 additional figurations in Nazca, Peru. The cultural discovery enriches our knowledge of the ancient Nazca culture. That is a win for human civilization. However, rather than a source of better understanding of the history of human cultures and civilizations, the Nazca Lines now seem to be primarily viewed by those governing them as a means to generate income, given that they are one of the leading tourist attractions. Enriching our knowledge and generating income for a few elites are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The choice, however, is one that humans can and should make rather than leaving it to AI.

The integration of AI into decision making, for example, in the cultural management context, has the potential to redefine the role of human expertise. In the worst case, it is a further step in its elimination of human expertise. At best, it is a significant change. Human expertise has been increasingly reduced to expertise in how to use technology, and now even generative technology, to produce that expertise. What we call experiences are also changing. They used to be about using the five senses, but they are increasingly moderated by a screen, by prompts, and now by AI. Baudrillard (1994) had a sense of this. Do we need to see the real thing, or is a fake ok? For example, the actual caves of Lascaux, one of the most important sites in understanding human history, is now entirely closed. But a replica has been opened nearby that welcomes hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. If the line between real and fake was dubious before, it is possibly even more so with AI.

Conclusion

This essay explores the intersection of George Ritzer's concept of McDonaldization and the growing influence of AI, particularly generative AI, in shaping contemporary society

and culture. The process of McDonaldization describes how rationalization processes modeled after the fast-food industry have reshaped institutions and social life. The conversation by the authors was focused on the growing use and reliance on AI in line with and beyond the McDonaldization principles.

AI constitutes a fundamentally non-human technology, thereby foregrounding a critical concern: the escalating irrationality that emerges when humans are subordinated to machines that lack human values and reasoning. While AI systems are initially designed and developed by humans (at least for now), a growing likelihood is that these systems will attain a considerable degree of autonomy, potentially operating beyond direct human oversight or control. The potential for such a development provokes significant tension between human agency and the determinism inherent in technological systems. Thus, such a trajectory raises critical questions about the future of creativity, the preservation of cultural identity, and the role of technological agency in shaping artistic production.

The authors suggest that AI reinforces McDonaldization by promoting automation, standardization, and cultural homogenization. Generative AI, unlike earlier forms of AI, possesses the capacity for self-directed creation, raising concerns about the erosion of human creativity, cultural authenticity, and diversity. AI's widespread adoption may diminish human agency and redefine cultural management, reducing the role of human expertise and experience.

The concept of McDonaldization serves as a valuable sociological lens through which to examine the rationalization of social life, particularly in the context of rapidly advancing digital technologies. AI, especially in its generative forms, both reflects and intensifies the core principles identified by Ritzer: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. It also raises concerns about the irrationality of rationality. By embedding these principles into algorithmic systems and automated infrastructures, AI technologies contribute to the ongoing standardization, automation, and depersonalization of human experience. The logic of McDonaldization persists and evolves within the digital sphere, reshaping social institutions and interactions. In an era increasingly defined by rapid technological advancement, Ritzer's concept of McDonaldization remains a crucial framework for understanding the transformation of social institutions and everyday life. As digital technologies and AI become more embedded in social, economic, and cultural systems, these principles are not only reinforced but also arguably accelerated.

There is little doubt that McDonaldization has radically disrupted human society. It has changed human processes, relations, and values. There is also little doubt that generative AI is doing the same. There are McDonaldizing processes underway that are significantly transforming society, social relations, and human beings themselves.

It is entirely possible, and increasingly the case that our understanding of culture can be defined free of the reigns of human intervention. As societal evolution progresses, it is possible that AI will come to define what is human, rather than humans defining what is AI. The analysis offered here outlines the urgent need to critically assess the broader societal implications of digital rationalization, particularly as it relates to creativity, individuality, and the preservation of human agency in an increasingly automated and homogenized world.

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