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Corporate Communication or McCommunication? Considering a McDonaldization of Corporate Communication Hypothesis

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In this essay the perspective of Ritzer's McDonaldization of Society Thesis is the starting point for developing hypotheses about corporate communication (CorpCom). The central idea of McDonaldization is that increasing numbers of organizations are run as fast food restaurants, focusing on: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control of people. That produces a form of rationality that becomes irrational. It is hypothesized that CorpCom is an ally of McDonaldization and the more the principles of McDonaldization are applied the more McDonaldized CorpCom becomes. This "McCommunication" could be less effective in gaining identification, support and trust from stakeholders than non-McDonaldized CorpCom.

KEYWORDS *corporate communication (CorpCom), critical research, hypotheses, McDonaldization, rationalization*

INTRODUCTION

The way a corporation is presented by individuals, interest groups, and journalists is likely to be of daily concern to a corporate communication (CorpCom) manager. Since the 1990s, a new field has developed composed of CorpCom practitioners and academics who are concerned with the internal and external communication activities of an organization (see, e.g., Argenti, 2003). This newly recognized field joins other fields that have been

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traditionally concerned with communication in the context of organizations, such as organizational communication, business communication, and public relations. CorpCom became defined as “a management function that offers a framework for the effective coordination of all internal and external communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favorable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent” (Cornelissen, 2008, p. 5). The corporation’s voice (Argenti & Forman, 2002), and the orchestration and coordination of its communications (Brønn & Wiig, 2003), and common starting points for communication (Van Riel, 2003) are the central concepts related to CorpCom. It is, as Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) observed, “a pervasive mindset,” p. 385) about the integration, coordination, and orchestration of communication of organizations. Key words in descriptions and definitions of CorpCom represent the *umbrella* concepts for the communication activities of corporations, under which all communication about the corporate entity is managed beneath *one banner*, *coherence* in the communication is ensured and communication occurs to *all at once* (Christensen & Cornelissen). The field of CorpCom became characterized by a “*common mindset* (. . .) shaped by images and ideals of unity, wholeness and totality” (Christensen & Cornelissen, p. 387), applied and aspired to in practice as “a goal of projecting a *consistent and unambiguous* image of what an organization ‘is’ and what it stands for” (Christensen & Cornelissen, p. 387).

The rise and growth of CorpCom, with its emphasis on unity, management and control, coincided with the rise of what some call *management culture* (Van den Brink, Jansen, & Pessers, 2005) or the MBA-invasion in organizations (e.g. Mintzberg, 2004). The increasing influence of the principles of management systems and managers in organizations has produced increasing tension between managers and professionals in organizations. Sociological accounts of organizations and managers suggest that today’s management is characterized by a low tolerance for substantive complexity, variety, ambiguity and multiple interpretations and is focused instead on procedures and structures, uniformity, quantifiability, and planned changes (see e.g., De Bruijn, 2005, Van den Brink et al., and the work of Sennett 1998, 2008). The key words and concepts of this management culture seem to align well with words and concepts used in CorpCom. In a critical line of reasoning Christensen and Cornelissen (2011), asked from the perspective of organizational communication, “What type of organization emerges in a social environment in which both managers and critical stakeholders focus compulsively on wholeness, consistency and integration in all communication?” (Christensen & Cornelissen, p. 403). Expanding this line of reasoning, we can ask, what happens to the legitimation of an organization when managers (both general and communication managers) focus compulsively on wholeness, consistency and integration in all communications? We can also ask what long-term effects this focus by CorpCom managers has

on the development of organizations and their societies. To explore these questions, we need a broad perspective on production and consumption processes. Such a perspective can be found in sociology, where processes of production and consumption have been critically analyzed, for example, in work on the McDonaldization of society thesis by Ritzer (2004, 2006, 2011). This McDonaldization perspective will be used as a starting point to explore the possible role of CorpCom in processes of McDonaldization, its possible effects on stakeholders and the question of whether CorpCom is a manifestation of the McDonaldization of communication in the context of organizations.

McDonaldization of Society Theory

The basic idea of McDonaldization is that growing numbers of organizations today are run like fast food restaurants. The organizing principles of the fast food restaurant have invaded our society, and thus Ritzer (2004, 2011) labeled this development the McDonaldization of society. This McDonaldization thesis is an account of the development of management and organizations over the last decades, criticizing the side effects of the ongoing economic rationalization of production and consumption and the alienating effects this has on society as a whole. McDonaldized organizations are focused on four elements in their production processes: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and nonhuman control over humans. These four elements together produce a form of rationality that because of its side effects becomes irrational. Ritzer (2004, 2011) calls this phenomenon the irrationality of rationality. This is the fifth dimension of McDonaldization.

McDonaldization has its historical roots in Weber's bureaucracy and the "iron cage of rationality" that accompanied this bureaucratic method of organizing. The notion of bureaucracy was followed by Taylor's scientific management, in which organizations aimed to find the one best way of production, leading to the assembly line, which has been "turning workers into robots" (Ritzer, 2011, p. 31). Over the past 30 years, these bureaucracies and factories have been converted into fast food factories. The management of these facilities is based on the organization of fast food restaurants. This process of McDonaldization has had positive results. Ritzer mentions, for example, the availability of a wider range of goods and services to a larger segment of the population than ever before. People can acquire what they want much more rapidly and with more convenience than before, products and services are of uniform quality, people are treated similarly and the most popular products of one culture can be much more easily disseminated to other cultures (Ritzer, 2011). McDonaldization is an inevitable development but has negative effects as well that need to be addressed by organizations and societies.

The five dimensions of McDonaldization do not concern only the management and employees of a McDonaldized organization; they also concern the stakeholders of the organization, especially its customers. A key aspect of McDonaldization is that the consumer has been made part of the production process. The institutionalization of *efficiency* has been taken one step further in the McDonaldization process, not only by streamlining the production process, simplifying products and services and prescribing each step that is taken in the working process, but also by putting the customer to work. The customer in a fast food restaurant is part of the production process and is required to perform part of the work of the organization, such as walking with the food to a table and disposing of the trash after the meal. The second dimension of McDonaldization, *calculability*, contains the quantification of everything in the organization, from the time spent on an activity by staff to the sales targets. The emphasis in organizations is on quantity and not on quality. Production and work are reduced to numbers: calculating, counting and quantifying are central. This calculability makes products and services *predictable*, which is the third dimension. For example, a Big Mac sandwich is the same at every McDonald's in the world. Within this dimension of predictability, organizations also produce predictable settings for their customers by minimizing danger and unpleasantness. Employees are required to be predictable as well: the interaction between employees and customers and other stakeholders of the organization becomes scripted. Predictability "has a tendency to turn everything—consumption, work, management—into mind-numbing routine" (Ritzer, 2011, p. 97). The fourth dimension of McDonaldization is *control*. Controlling employees and customers, mainly through nonhuman technology, is a cornerstone of McDonaldized management. Human technology is controlled by people; nonhuman technology controls people. Control over employees is relatively easily accomplished with computerized working schemes, rules and regulations. Controlling customers is conducted using a number of methods, such as creating a fast food restaurant environment (Ritzer, 2011).

McDonaldization produces a number of negative side effects, summarized in its fifth dimension: the *irrationality of rationality* (Ritzer, 2011). In the eyes of employees and customers, McDonaldized production leads to unreason. The unreasonable outcomes of the process are inefficiency, waiting lines that grow longer instead of shorter, higher costs for consumers, false friendliness, the illusion of fun, disenchantment, health and environmental risks, homogenization and dehumanization. Creativity, diversity and choice tend to get lost in the McDonaldization process.

The McDonaldized organizations themselves have attempted to compensate the negative side effects of McDonaldization, for example by building new relationships with empowered consumers (Thrassou & Vrontis, 2009) and co-creation (Turner & Shockley, 2014). Ritzer (2010) calls this drive to compensate "enchanted a disenchanting world": a new means of

consumption is established to enable the consumption of all types of products and services. In the so-called cathedrals of consumption, such as shopping malls, superstores and cruise ships, organizations attempt to re-enchant their disenchanted organizations, products and services to compensate for the loss of meaning that consumers feel when they are confronted with McDonaldized organizations. On the other end of the production and consumption spectrum, consumers have also found many ways to handle the ongoing economic rationalization of the world and the disenchanting effects it has on their lives. The most important development in this area is what is called the rise of “prosumption” and the “prosumer” (Ritzer, 2010; Ritzer, Dean, & Jurgenson, 2012). Prosumption refers to the development that production and consumption today are often no longer separate processes but take place simultaneously. Consumers take part in the entire experience of products and services today and contribute to the product or service itself and thus to the sense-making process that surrounds products and services and, for example, to the active promotion of products or services. Much of this postmodern re-enchantment (e.g., Bauman, 1993) is accomplished by enticing consumers to take part in the production and consumption process. Organizations have found many ways to seduce consumers. Ritzer (2011) discusses a range of activities such as creating spectacles for consumers with extravaganzas and simulations that help restore meaning to the products and services they are consuming or prosuming. Many of these spectacles are communication events related to advertising, branding, marketing, sales, and promotion.

Communication, media and promotion are at the heart of the McDonaldization theory, from the dominant role of branding and marketing to the role of Web 2.0 and its user-generated content, to the production of McPaper (the newspaper USA Today) and campaigns against the McDonaldization processes. Although communication and media are important aspects of McDonaldization, how communication and media work and how they actually affect consumers is not analyzed or problematized in the theory. The idea of CorpCom as a different type of communication than marketing communication does not have a place in the theory for example. Communication is just an unproblematic aspect of McDonaldization. From the perspective of communication in the context of organizations, this raises a question about the role of CorpCom in McDonaldization and the propagation of consumer culture.

CORPCOM AND MCDONALDIZATION

Exploring the question of the role of the CorpCom function in McDonaldization, we begin by recalling the definition of it as a pervasive mindset and the key concepts associated with CorpCom: the corporation’s voice,

orchestration, coordination, unity, wholeness, and totality (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011). From these key terms, it can easily be hypothesized that CorpCom is well aligned with the management vision of McDonaldization if it exists in the organization. Such CorpCom, striving for unity, wholeness and totality could be pictured as helping management to reach its goals of efficiency, calculability, predictability and nonhuman control by effectively coordinating all internal and external communication of the organization. Communication is seen as an instrument of management that can be mobilized to realize these goals and that provides the means to propagate the opinions and ideas of managers within an organization. The purpose of this type of CorpCom is ensuring that stakeholders are in agreement with the positions of the management and that a positive reputation of the organization related to the communication will be achieved or maintained.

Such a role of CorpCom resonates well with the literature and research conducted within the field CorpCom and communication management and is associated with the permanent call for a well-established role for communication professionals in organizations, for example, as part of the most influential group of managers in the organization (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier 2002). This role matches well with sender-oriented models of communication in which CorpCom is essentially defined as sending the right message through the right channel to the right targeted stakeholder. One-way communication models such as the press agent or propaganda model and the public information model (Grunig et al.) suit this conceptualization. Certainly, the persuasive model or the two-way asymmetrical model (Grunig et al.) used in CorpCom seems to fit McDonaldization well; it is possible that corporations that want to McDonaldize will use persuasion techniques in their CorpCom to achieve their goals. This also resonates with accounts of CorpCom such as spin doctoring and manipulating stakeholders' perceptions (e.g., Ewan, 1996). In addition, dialogical modes of communication such as the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig et al.; Van Riel, 2003) could be used as a strategy to achieve the goals of McDonaldization as well. These two-way models of communication also give room to dialogue with stakeholders about the organization's goals. In some capacities, especially in one-way and two-way asymmetrical models of CorpCom, professionals seem to facilitate and support McDonaldized management. This is in line with the question Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) asked about what kind of organization emerges in an environment where managers and important stakeholders focus so much on wholeness, consistency and integration of all communication.

Except literature there is abundant anecdotal evidence showing aspects of CorpCom that is a part of McDonaldization. In the area of *efficiency*, for example, CorpCom programs could be supporting the streamlining of production processes with internal communication activities and apply extensive communication activities to help the customer to do the work themselves. Putting the customer to work indeed is one of the major features of the

efficiency dimension of McDonaldization. The many tasks that were formerly performed by employees of a corporation now have to be performed by the customers themselves. These new and sometimes quite difficult tasks need means of communication to instruct the customer about how to perform those tasks according to the corporation's requirements. There are many examples of customers performing the corporation's work, such as doing one's own banking through the internet, reading one's own electricity and water meters to inform the utilities companies about consumption, printing one's own tickets for the train or buying tickets at a machine, checking in at airports at a machine, bringing one's own food on budget airlines and helping the police to find criminals. In this area, much communication expertise seems to be applied to inform stakeholders what they need to do and how they need to do it and to persuade them to actually perform the task. Regarding *calculability*, CorpCom could be seen as helping to present the corporation's activities in quantifiable units and numbers. Communication again begins with informing the employees of the corporation so that they know how long they have to perform certain tasks or exactly how they should produce a product or service. This calculability needs to be framed for the other stakeholders in a way that it demonstrates the constant quantities of the products or services to "create an illusion of quantity" (Ritzer, 2004, p. 81). In communication, quantity rather than quality must then be stressed, and products and services are reduced to numbers. In the third dimension of McDonaldization, *predictability*, it is possible that CorpCom not only helps to make products and services look predictable but also help to make employees and their communication predictable. This can be observed in the rise of scripted employees, employees who are required to use scripts in their communication with customers or other stakeholders, for example in call centers. Much of the interaction between stakeholders and large corporations today is scripted. Even the interaction between spokespersons of a corporation and journalists can sometimes be scripted. The streamlining and scripting of employees can also be linked to the fourth dimension of McDonaldization, nonhuman *control* over humans and over production. Apart from internal communication programs to make efficient nonhuman control possible, CorpCom, when scripting employees, helps control them in their communication with other stakeholders. For employees, this could often take on the character of what Ritzer called "Do as I say and not as I do" (Ritzer, 2004, p. 112). Many slogans that organizations use to promote their mission statements and other policies can be given a new meaning in another context. Employees and other stakeholders in McDonaldized organizations are supposed to act according to the slogans of the organization rather than according to the actions of the organization (Ritzer, 2004).

At the same time that CorpCom departments help organizations with the McDonaldization of their organizations, they are also the ones most likely to be the first to be confronted with the irrationality that the economic rationality

of the organization evokes. Stakeholders who disagree with the opinions and ideas of the organization come knocking on the door and generally that will be the door of the CorpCom professional. The irrationality of rationality, as the fifth dimension of McDonaldization, is likely to become visible and tangible in their offices. All types of tensions throughout the organization, for example, those regarding environmental, health and other societal issues, seem to converge in the CorpCom department.

From this perspective, we can hypothesize that CorpCom in organizations assists McDonaldization. Compensation for the disenchantment that can be the result of McDonaldization seems to be apparent for example when presenting the organization as a brand, with the entire concomitant spectacle. The rise of corporate branding in the last decade (e.g., Hatch & Schultz, 2009) could, from the perspective of the McDonaldization theory, be considered as an endeavor of organizations to re-enchant their rationalized organizations internally with their own employees and externally with consumers and other stakeholders. Corporate branding than is the instrument to enchant the disenchanted world and to give prosumers an opportunity to be a part of the organization.

Another question is whether the rise of CorpCom as a label for the communication function of organizations has been a manifestation of the McDonaldization of the communication in organizations and society? Has communication itself become the *subject* of McDonaldization and is that kind of organizational communication now labeled CorpCom? When (corporate) communication needs to be accounted for in a quantitative way and organized efficiently, calculably, predictably and controllably, it could become McDonaldized itself. The trend toward accountability of communication (Van Woerkum & Aarts, 2011) and reputation evaluation techniques (Van Riel, 2003) seems to touch on the McDonaldization of CorpCom. With the rise of the concept of CorpCom, a new vocabulary to speak of communication in the context of organizations has been developed. The more traditional concepts of, for example, attitude and image that served as dependent variables to measure the effects of the communication activities of organizations became unfashionable. They are increasingly replaced by reputation, a construct to measure how stakeholders perceive an organization. This construct has been taken a step further by Fombrun and Van Riel (2004), who developed a reputation quotient, a number that expresses how stakeholders think about an organization. This construct consists of six dimensions: emotional appeal, financial performance, products and services, vision and leadership, workplace environment, and social responsibility. Members of the stakeholder groups of investors, consumers and the general public are asked to assess these dimensions. The results are calculated to formulate a reputation quotient that can change each year. From the perspective of McDonaldization, this reputation quotient could be seen as an example of the calculability and quantification of CorpCom. The results of the activities

are indeed summarized in one figure expressing the reputation. Other scales to measure corporate reputations have different drivers that often include authenticity specifically as one of the aspects of corporate reputation (e.g. Lewellyn, 2002, Van den Bosch, de Jong, & Elving, 2005). Authenticity is important for the reputation of an organization (e.g. Fombrun, 2005) but seems to be the antithesis of McDonaldization. In the light of McDonaldization theory the question is how authentic is corporate authenticity? Do stakeholders believe that corporations are authentic and how do they value the authentic communication of organizations?

A similar development related to the value and accountability of communication has taken place in the world of branding of both products and corporations for example to consider the impact of brand equity and the reputation on the revenue of a company (Yungwook, 2001). The term brand equity is used to assign financial value to a brand and to express this value in quantifiable terms (see e.g., Franzen, 2007). The desire to express a fundamental communicative concept such as a brand in quantitative financial terms seems to fit the McDonaldization of society thesis well. Brand equity and the reputation quotient, are good examples of what McQuail (2005) called the commodification of communication, a term that was used in the context of the development of the media and its audiences. In the context of branding, commodification can be seen as the treatment of a corporate brand as a product on its own with an independent material cash value, expressed by its financial value. The audience, or users of the brand, is treated as a commodity as well, to which the brand needs to be sold. When CorpCom is moving in the direction of increasing efficiency, calculability, predictability, and controllability, it can also start moving in the direction of the commodification of CorpCom. For the present, the somewhat less serious term “McCommunication” could be used as a label for CorpCom that moves in the direction of quantifiability as a goal in combination with the other four dimensions of McDonaldization.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

From the perspective of McDonaldization and the rise of management culture there is anecdotal evidence that CorpCom is an ally of the McDonaldization of organizations and society. These anecdotes are not tested empirically though, which is an important limitation of the perspective. A research program could be developed to verify the following three hypotheses:

H1: The more McDonaldized an organization is, the more communication is labeled as CorpCom.

H2: The more McDonaldized an organization is, the more McDonaldized its CorpCom is.

H3: Non-McDonaldized CorpCom is more effective in gaining identification, support and trust from stakeholders and society than McDonaldized CorpCom.

Testing these hypotheses contributes to the theory of McDonaldization by extending it to CorpCom and by providing empirical evidence or not for McDonaldization of organizations and especially of CorpCom. Such a research program develops the theory further adding a broad and critical view of CorpCom and connecting to related fields like organizational communication as proposed by Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) Meanwhile CorpCom practitioners could already become more aware of McDonaldization in their organizations the consequences thereof for CorpCom and the relationships with internal and external stakeholders.

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