The Power of Social Models

Unwrapping McDonalds

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Forty years ago George Ritzer published his famous McDonaldization thesis in the Journal of American Culture, which he developed into one of the most widely read sociology books of all time. *The McDonaldization of Society* used Max Weber's concept of an "iron cage" of rationality to argue that principles used by this fast-food chain dominate many sectors of society. But Ritzer's model of sociology does not help people solve problems and leads to feelings of powerlessness. His analysis did not slow the rise of McDonald's, which grew from under 10,000 outlets in 1983 to over 40,270 in 2023, while its share price soared from $1.25 ($3.80 in today's prices) to $300 (see Fig 1). Meanwhile the proportion of social science students continued to fall (see US data).

Fig 1. Source: Macrotrends: McDonald's - 51 Year Stock Price History | MCD. Arrow points to origins of McDonaldization thesis.

Although social research offers many methods and findings to solve social problems, they often remain within the academic realm. Thus the McDonaldization thesis has been cited in over 8,700 publications and applied to countless institutions from archives to universities. The bigger problem, as William Starbuck observed in *The Production of Knowledge: The Challenge of Social Science Research*, is that "Hundreds of thousands of talented researchers are producing little of lasting value" because they are focused on producing journal articles rather than knowledge (5, 142), trapped in an "iron cage" of the academic citation treadmill.

The Mcdonald's model is also a real time experiment in how to achieve specific outcomes— returns on investment, meals, celebrations, employment, identity, status, etc. Like a theory in the natural sciences, McDonald's is a replicable model of an aspect of reality that produces reliable outcomes. The model is widely taught and used by countless businesses, giving credence to the McDonaldization thesis, but the more important lesson is McDonald's actively uses research to continuously improve its ability to achieve its objectives. The model has changed significantly since Ritzer's times, because it is reflexive, using feedback and new knowledge to improve outcomes. The model ensures consistent outcomes across continents. Just as space travel depends on the laws of physics being the same everywhere, McDonald's relies on consistency across many regimes. In *Usable Knowledge: Social Science and Social Problem Solving*, Lindblom and Cohen suggest that policy frameworks which make this stability possible are equivalent to Thomas Kuhn's paradigms in natural science (Lindblom *et al* 77).

Most institutions have more complex aims than McDonald's, but the lesson is that social research can help people improve society by treating institutions as social

experiments and models of how to achieve specific outcomes. Every institution embodies knowledge about how to do things. People copy or adapt institutions to achieve similar outcomes. A synagogue, school, or street market is recognizable across centuries, countries, and cultures. Institutional models are scaled up, refined, and replicated to provide similar functions in different societies, or adapted to achieve different outcomes. A social model is never static. Yet many transmit behaviours and knowledge for generations, surviving dramatic changes in belief, like the continuation of features of the Tsarist state in the Soviet Union and Putin's Russia. Social models may therefore be seen as 'dynamic social theories', tested and developed in reality every day.

Layers of Social Analysis

In *Unwrapping the McDonald's Model*, I argue that people use at least nine layers of analysis to bring about its outcomes (see Fig. 2).

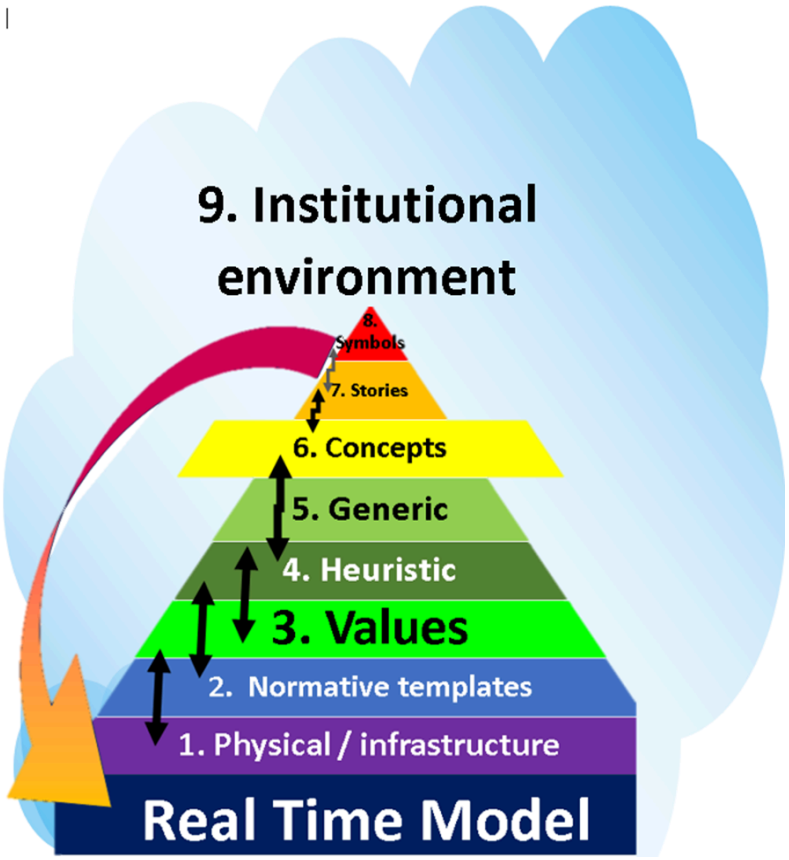

Fig. 2: Layers of analysis in social models blend into and inform each other, since they are all dimensions of the real time model as the base.

Each McDonald's outlet is a unique real-time model that includes the experiences, emotions, aspirations and beliefs of people involved, as well as the knowledge, skills, processes, routines, and relationships that make it work. Their performance may be tightly prescribed, but it has built-in processes for review and renewal. Many of its innovations, such as Big Macs, Filet-o-Fish and McVegan, came from staff or customers far from headquarters. As Lindblom and Cohen pointed out, "Much of the world's work of problem solving is accomplished not through PSI [Professional Social Inquiry] but through ordinary knowledge, through social learning, and through interactive problem solving" (Lindblom *et al*: 91).

Conceptual models produced by academics are just one form of knowledge used by people to make society work for them (level 6 in Fig. 1). But conceptual models are only snapshots, like organisational charts that gradually cease to be relevant. The working knowledge embedded in physical infrastructure, routines, training manuals, values and everyday beliefs of customers and staff are more influential. The institutional environment of suppliers, regulators, media and social conditions (level 9) also convey knowledge that influence real-time models.

The most powerful forms of knowledge are often stories and symbols. The McDonaldization thesis and McDonald's model as taught in business schools are both stories about the same company, but the first is disempowering while the latter promises pathways to riches. No wonder business studies became our most successful social science while sociology declined. Symbols such as the golden arches convey meaning at a glance, reinforced by ritual. In academia, degree classification, graduation

gowns, and citation scores symbolise its status as the apex of education, but they say little about the usefulness of the knowledge produced.

Lessons for Social Science

McDonald's is applied social science, its model tested daily in thousands of outlets and stock markets. The lesson is not to imitate McDonald's but to integrate social research into institutions to improve people's ability to create better outcomes. McDonald's staff use all nine layers of analysis in each real-time outlet under their control, blending a wide range of knowledge into everyday actions to achieve its objectives and replicate or reinvent itself.

A real-time model may appear like an "iron cage" of rationality, but it is possible to change customary ways of doing things. The cooperative movement, Khan Academy, Toyota, Wikipedia and many other organisations offer alternative models to McDonalds. Weber's "iron cage" can be

Treating institutions as "dynamic social theories" embodying knowledge of how to do things would encourage social researchers to help people make institutions better at solving problems and meeting needs, just as the natural sciences use theories to help people solve problems in the material world. We could even transform our models of social science and higher education to increase people's ability to improve the human condition at scale.

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