

“McJournalism”: The McDonaldization Thesis and Junk Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Journalists and academics have been much preoccupied of late with what is undoubtedly a significant and expansive journalistic phenomenon which has been variously described as the “tabloidisation” or “tabloiding” (clumsy words and even more awkward concepts) of news and current affairs which has witnessed news media preferring to offer a blend of information and entertainment (“infotainment”) or even emotion and entertainment (“emotainment”) above “hard” news. The extensive use of “commas” here signals the uncertainty about the meaning of many of these terms. This trend is allegedly “market driven” and reflects the increasing competitiveness and corporatisation of media markets. What has come to be described as the “dumbing down debate” engages both those who “lament” (John Langer’s phrase) the decline in traditional journalism and those enthusiasts who wish to celebrate the emergence of more popular cultural forms.

In this paper I offer some preliminary theorising of a different kind of explanation for the evident shift in both the form and content of news reporting across the last decade. This tendency, I suggest, might usefully be understood as a single element in a wider socio-historical process first described by Weber as rationalisation. More recently, George Ritzer has adopted the metaphor of a fast food restaurant based on the principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control to characterise this intensifying process of rationalisation which characterises modernity: Ritzer’s neologism of the “McDonaldization” thesis captures and articulates this trend. Increasing areas of social life are subject to McDonaldization including packaged holidays and even education with its stress on league tables which measure what is quantifiable, rather than attempting to assess the quality of the educational experience. I wish to argue that the emergence of a highly standardised, packaged journalism (especially journalism focused on politics and current affairs) might be identified as a further manifestation of McDonaldization. The debate is not about the “dumbing down” of news media so much as their convergence to a standardised site reflecting Alan Rusbridger’s claim that the *Guardian* is becoming a “broadloid”. The high quality political journalism (including extensive parliamentary reporting) which used to offer a culinary feast, has been replaced by what Andrew Marr denounced as “bite-sized McNugget journalism” and what might better be described in the context of the current paper as “McJournalism”. Two consequences follow: the “force feeding” of readers and viewers with a relentlessly uniform and predictable diet of news (predictable news, surely an oxymoron?); the “spoon feeding” of news in ever more accessible formats exemplified by the new range of political programmes on BBC.

“McJournalism”, The McDonaldization Thesis and Junk Journalism

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a significant and controversial development in contemporary journalism which is currently attracting considerable scholarly attention; namely the evident and substantial shift in the editorial values of journalists and programme makers which has prompted media academics (Sampson 1996), as well as distinguished journalists (Engels 1996) and broadcasters (Cronkite 1998; Humphrys 1999), to criticise national and local media for “dumbing down”, being subject to a process of ever growing “tabloidisation” and offering only “trivial infotainment” rather than “high quality programming” and more serious and considered analyses of news and current affairs.

The evidence to support the dumbing down thesis is hotly contested. Winston, for example, compared television news contents and formats from the *Bad News* days of 1975 with an equivalent sample of news output broadcast during 2000-2001 but noted no significant shifts (Winston, 2002). By contrast Barnett and Seymour’s study of television drama and current affairs across 20 years, observed some striking changes especially the sharp decline in the foreign news components of current affairs programming (Barnett and Seymour 1999, Barnett, Seymour and Gaber 2000)). Despite the controversy concerning the evidential base to support this alleged dumbing down, a critical and counter argument has emerged in which newspaper editors such as Alan Rusbridger and Piers Morgan have suggested that there has been a “dumbing up” of the news, while others have argued that recent developments offer testament to the degree to which our understanding of what constitutes “quality” news has too frequently been gendered (Costera Meijer 2001) or that what has occurred has been a “dumbing down of the workforce” in certain key respects (Ursell 2003). Other accounts have made a plea for extending journalistic repertoires to embrace a *public quality* approach to broadcasting which rejects the binary polarities of popular and quality news (Costera Meijer 2003)

The dumbing down phenomenon, moreover, is judged to be global in reach and is generating an academic and journalistic literature in America (Fallows 1996), the UK (Franklin, 1997, Franklin and Pilling 1998, McNair 1997, Barnett and Seymour 1999, Winston 2002); the ‘new democracies’ of Central and Eastern Europe (Coman 2000, Sparks and Tulloch 1999); Australia (Langer 1998, Turner 2001), Africa (Berger 2000), France (Bordieu 1998), Sweden (Djerff Pierre 2000), Norway (Ytreberg 2001) and Germany (recent issue of EJC). While much of the analysis of this trend in journalism has focused on newspapers (Engel 1996), especially the shift in news values so noticeable in broadsheet newspapers (Franklin 1997), other studies have analysed and explored similar developments in television (Campaign for Quality Television 1998) and radio (Crisell 1998, McManus 1994).

Analysis of the causes of this trend towards tabloid media identifies the usual suspects. First, the increasingly competitive market in which news media operate, reflecting recent changes in broadcasting policy and legislation, which generates pressures to move “down market” and offer what is increasingly described as “bottom line journalism” or “market driven journalism” (McManus 1994). Second, the absence of statutory press regulation, which permits newspaper prurience, and routine press incursions into the privacy of individuals: the PCC code only seems effective in protecting the privacy of offspring of the royal family and what the tabloids delight in dubbing “Premier League Love Rats”. For their part, broadcast media have been regulated with a “lighter touch” following the provisions of the Broadcasting Acts of 1990 and 1996, while the new Communications Act promises to provide additional impetus to both trends by removing regulatory controls on cross media ownership and current ownership restrictions on

Channel 3 licences along with changes to content regulation for Channels 3 and 5. Third, the growth of both public and private sector public relations, combined with the relatively declining numbers of journalists, encourages an increasing media reliance on “subsidies” from these sources of news and other journalistic materials: Max Clifford and his peers are increasingly ‘placing’ stories in the motoring, holiday, lifestyle and celebrity sections of the tabloid press (Davis 2002, Franklin 1997). Finally, technological developments in both print and broadcast media have prompted further cuts in journalist numbers, prompted casualisation of the profession, while empowering media owners with greater influence and control over editorial concerns (Franklin and Murphy 1998; McGregor 1997).

McDonaldization

The broad social process of McDonaldization was first identified by Max Weber in his seminal analyses of modernisation, although he preferred to use the term rationalisation, which he argued typified modern, industrial, capitalist societies and required the application of rational decision making in increasing areas of social life (See Brubaker 1984, Whimster and Lash 1987). The traditional or technical rationality model of science was linked with the general form of reasoning which Weber termed “zweckrationalitat” or “instrumental rationality” which is central to rationalisation. Instrumental rationality is concerned with calculable expectations and, within the general sphere of instrumental rationality, the selection of the most adequate means to achieve a given end can be assessed in terms of its objective rationality – that is scientifically. Instrumental rationality is distinguished from “wertrationalitat” or “value rationality” which is oriented to consciously upheld values. As instrumental rationality comes to dominate, in the process of modernisation, values and ends are effectively excluded from the framework of rationality. Freed from the external constraint of values (historically the Protestant ethic) productivity, the hallmark of industrial capitalism, coupled with scientific and technological progress, becomes an end in itself as opposed to a means whereby independently established human needs may be satisfied.

The overall effect is to construct a complex ‘iron cage’ of bureaucratic rules and regulations geared to calculable economic efficiency. At the beginning of the twentieth century Weber wrote:

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, whether new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanised petrification, embellished with a sort of compulsive self-importance. For the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart: this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilisation never before achieved (1974, p. 182).

It seems that mechanised petrification could well be on the cards. Inspired by these Weberian insights, George Ritzer (1993) argues that the process of rationalisation is continuing and intensifying (1998, p. 95). In 1993, Ritzer neologised the term McDonaldization to characterise the highly controlled, bureaucratic and dehumanised nature of contemporary, particularly American, social life. In his own words, it 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 the rest of the world” (Ritzer 1993, p. 1). The fast-food restaurant built on principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, where quantity and standardisation replace quality and variety as the indicators of value, serves as a metaphor for the general mania for efficiency. Increasing areas of social life are subject to McDonaldisation including packaged holidays (1998, pp134-50), the

contemporary university (1998, pp151-163), along with the shopping malls (1993,p. 29), shop and hotel chains (1993, p. 88) which make contemporary cityscapes look so strikingly similar: Brixton is barely distinguishable from Bangor, Brighton or Birmingham. It seems irresistible to add the increasingly homogenous tabloid press, the local newspapers articulating an evident corporate style imposed from the centre, the uniform formats of television journalism with their preoccupation with going live, conducting two ways and the growing obsession with journalists talking to journalists, as well as the banality and similarity of the scripted docu-soaps.

Ritzer has also considered the organisation and experience of work and linked his perspective to Braverman's (1974) analysis of the labour process. He recognises that the de-skilling and degradation of labour is characteristic of rationalisation. Work has been increasingly rationalised through bureaucracies, scientific management assembly lines and so on. Now the process of McDonaldization is leading to the creation of more and more McJobs – jobs characterised by the four dimensions of McDonaldization (Ritzer 1998, pp 59-70): journalism is increasingly earning a place here. In McJobs, work is highly routinised, thinking is reduced to a minimum and even social interactions (with customers), as in the case of call centres, are scripted (see Hochschild 1983). Higher level skills, creativity, critique as well as genuine personal contact and interaction are effectively excluded so both producers and, in the service industries, consumers are systematically disempowered.

There are four dimensions to McDonaldization:

Efficiency – the discovery and implementation of the best way to do virtually everything: “*Efficiency* means the choice of the optimum means to a given end” (1993, p. 35). Ritzer is concerned with the efficiency with which goods and services are delivered to consumers. Hence fast-food restaurants provide more efficient means of obtaining meals than cooking at home from raw ingredients. McDonald's provides the best means for “getting us from a state of being hungry to a state of being full” in much the same way that Woody Allen's orgasmatron offers an efficient method for “getting us from quiescence to sexual stimulation to sexual gratification”(Ritzer 1993, p. 9). But Ritzer is also concerned with efficiency in the organisation of the production of goods and services. Consequently, production is driven by market forces and relations in a global system of production.

Calculability – the emphasis on things that can be counted and quantified: the time associated with work tasks is carefully calculated and quantity, rather than *quality*, becomes the measure of value (Ritzer 1993, pp62-82). So there are “Big Macs” rather than delicious Macs, large fries but not tasty fries, there are double and even triple decker burgers but not wholesome burgers, organic beef burgers.

Predictability – the emphasis on standardisation: in the world of McDonalds, the settings, the food and the behaviour of the staff are identical (Ritzer 1993, pp83-99). The food, as well as being “fast”, is absolutely standard and predictable. It is also standard across time and space – the Big Mac is the new universal. The Big Mac I eat today will be exactly the same as the one I ate yesterday - and the one I will buy tomorrow (this is probably the point at which to declare my vegetarianism). Similarly, the Big Mac I buy in Leicester will be just as big as yesterday's gluttonous feast in Sheffield.

Control – the careful control of people both workers and consumers, increasingly by the introduction of technology. Human skills are taken away from people (deskilling) both by the detailed scripting of behaviour (of both workers and customers) and the introduction of technologies (the frying machines decide when the fries are cooked, the drinks machine switches itself off when exactly the right amount of “shake” has been delivered). The chairs

are designed to be sufficiently attractive to seduce customers into McDonald's but not so comfortable that they encourage customers to linger when they have finished consuming. All rather reminiscent of the editorial in free newspapers which must be sufficiently eye catching to attract the attention of readers but not so appealing that they divert readers away from the advertising content of the papers, since advertisers need to be convinced that the free paper will be read and not simply discarded.

Ritzer acknowledges that there are positive outcomes from this process of McDonaldization and hence the global spread of the phenomenon – just like McDonald's (1998, pp 81-94). But there are “downsides”: “rational systems often spawn irrationalities” and can trigger *inefficiency*, *unpredictability*, *incalculability* and *loss of control* (1998, p. 121). In brief McDonaldization can lead to the “irrationality of rationality” since rationalised systems, seemingly inevitably, bring with them a series of irrationalities (what Weber termed unintended consequences). McDonaldized systems tend to have a negative effect on the environment and dehumanise the world. It is this dimension that gives the thesis its critical force (Ritzer 1993 and 1998).

The Growth of McJournalism?

Ritzer notes that McDonald's has become so symbolically significant in America, that a number of businesses are given nicknames with the prefix “Mc” in order to signal the extent to which they subscribe to the McDonald philosophy. Consequently the American paper *USA TODAY* is nicknamed “McPaper”, while the short pithy articles it publishes are known as “News McNuggets”. When *USA TODAY* launched a television programme modelled on the paper, some began to call it “News McRather” (Ritzer 1993, p. 4). To what degree does the McDonaldization thesis with its emphasis on efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, help to illuminate recent developments in journalism and to explain the emergence of what might be termed McJournalism.

Efficiency

McDonaldization is concerned with the efficiency of organisations in delivering goods and services to the consumer, but also with the efficient organisation of the production process.

Delivering the News

Ritzer claims that a trip to McDonalds is an efficient way of getting food but, conversely, he suggests that “serious” newspapers like the *Washington Post* are relatively inefficient to read. *USA TODAY* has learned the lesson. While the *Washington Post* carries stories that begin on the front page but carry over to one or more inside pages (which involves readers “jumping” pages”), *USA TODAY* offers News McNuggets which start and finish on the same page (1993, p. 57). The McPaper learned the lessons from *The Reader's Digest*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Business Week*: at the latter paper, the basic assumption is that “busy executives don't have time to read in depth so don't waste time reading the *Wall Street Journal* every day when one quick bite of *Business Week* once a week is sufficient to give you a step ahead of the competition” (Ritzer 1993, p. 58).

Newspapers have to make news readily accessible to readers. Consequently newspapers increasingly use big headlines, little (short) words, humorous (punny) headlines, sensational headlines, short stories, big pictures, colour pictures; more of them. Newspapers increasingly offer readers “News at a Glance” which provides a précis of the day's in a vertical column down the left or right hand side of the page: on the left hand

column of the inside page, the *Guardian* offers readers the “Two-Minute Guardian”. For “Busy People With Busy Lives” *Guardian* journalists thoughtfully provide *The Editor*, a small, glossy, colourful distillation of the week’s news, along with book and film reviews which can be read at a glance.

Television news formats are also driven by a growing preoccupation with efficiency of viewer access to news. The revamped BBC *News At Six* offers “6 news briefings” in which reporters adopt a pedagogic posture, stand in front of a large plasma screen and “teach” us about events of the day: Channel Five news distils complex news issues into “Five Facts” which, accompanied by drum ‘n’ bass music unravel the news story. Alternatively, viewer accessibility is achieved through the fad for “conversational journalism”: a predictable American import. Instead of reading the news to camera, reporters (there are typically two anchors selected to guarantee sexual chemistry!) talk about the news or discuss stories in conversational style (I hear it was a great game between the Bronx Buffaloes and the Sheffield Steelers last night Jim?) creating, for the audience, a sense of eavesdropping on a curiously private conversation rather than hearing the news read by a broadcaster.

Organising The News

Nationally and locally, the press is increasingly organised to reap the benefits of greater ‘efficiency’: in reality, a phrase which serves as a synonym for a press organised according to market principles. A major feature of this quest for efficiency has been the growing concentration of press ownership in increasingly fewer corporate hands across the last 10 years: this concentration of ownership generates uniformity. 90% of the national press by circulation is controlled by a handful of men: as Cohen notes “two are foreigners. All are rich and anti union – a combination that notoriously restricts the range of events they allow to be covered” (Cohen, 1999, p. 128). Locally the same trends towards monopoly and concentration are evident. Trinity Mirror, Johnston Press and Newsquest control nearly half local press sales while the 20 largest companies own 80% of the local press by circulation.

The impact on editorial is apparent. The editorial policy of a newspaper group policy may now influence content in 100 local papers. When I asked a local editor why his paper’s coverage of the 2001 elections was so sparse compared to 1997, he said the paper had been taken into group ownership and the message he was getting from the group was that “We need a human interest story on the front page every day”. Increasing group ownership translates into increasing uniformity of the once highly diverse local and regional press (Franklin and Richardson, 2002): McJournalism seems to be in the ascendancy.

Trades Unions (an imperfection in the market according to classical economic principles) have been progressively derecognised across the 1990 while during the same period new technology has been introduced resulting in substantial reductions in labour; especially production-based labour (Gall 1998). This is connected directly to the key problem which produces editorial uniformity and a dumbed down news agenda: the shortage of journalistic resources devoted to the. Quality news provision is incompatible with the ambitions of accountants. News is expensive to produce and there is no certainty that long term investigations, involving senior and expensive news staff, will ultimately deliver a publishable story. So good journalism is costly, uncertain and doubly damned. By contrast, lifestyle pieces, consumer journalism, interviews with celebrities and columnists’ endless speculations about “Is your partner giving his best in bed?” or “Do we need men?” (Germaine Greer, *Guardian* November 2002) provide cheap, guaranteed readable “hits”.

Some measures to secure efficiency seem bizarre: remote subbing offers an obvious example. Some local newspaper groups now employ a centralised team of subs, based remotely from the local newspaper, with each sub working on a number of papers to be sub edited rather than employing a local sub for each local paper. The subs have little, if any, local knowledge of the patch. The efficiency is high but the tie with the local community is severed and the quality of the editorial content is substantially reduced. It is not only the “processing” of news which is increasingly “centralised”. Newspapers are ever more reliant on news agencies, locally, nationally and internationally. Cuts (efficiencies) in news staffs, especially foreign correspondents based overseas means that the diversity and plurality of views, opinions and information available is truncated and reduced to a single source; the news agency. Agencies also provide a photojournalism service with the same images of events syndicated around the globe stamping the dull hand of uniformity on the presentation of news. Tabloid front pages too frequently “share” the same visual image to represent stories: increasingly, the stories are also the same.

Another aspect of the increasingly standardised agenda is the metropolitan focus of news reflecting the fact that 90% of national newspaper journalists are based in London. Thirty years ago a third of journalists worked outside London and reported the diversity of regional life: today no national newspaper has a staff reporter in Wales (Cohen, 1999, p. 126). Even the London hacks are “penned in the compounds of Canary Wharf and Wapping where barbed wire, private security patrols, CCTV and card swipers on every door emphasise their isolation from the country they are meant to cover (Cohen 1999, p. 126)

So far as broadcast media are concerned many of the same trends are evident. In the commercial sector there has been a notable increase in the concentration of ownership. The 15-company network, Channel 3 is now owned and controlled by Carlton and Granada who announced their merger plans on 16 October 2002. The new Communications Bill makes provision for a single owner of the Channel 3 network and consequently the merger of Carlton and Granada, as when Murdoch’s Sky television took over British Satellite Broadcasting, although illegal (literally) will be ignored because it merely runs ahead of anticipated legislative change.

The peak employment figure for Channel 3 was 1986/7 at 16,456 (Ursell 1998), which had reduced by 1993 to 9,500 (Miller and Allen 1994) and by 2000 had reduced still further to 7,971 (ITC 2001, p. 42). These figures moreover represent all staff: the numbers actually engaged in production reduce to approximately 3,420 (Ursell 2003). Examination of individual regional companies reveals considerable employment losses. At Yorkshire Television for example, the staff of 1670 in 1986, reduced to 1200 in 1993 and reduced dramatically to 800 by 2002 (Ursell 2003).

ITN the news provider to Channel 3 and 4 has seen particularly vicious cuts in staff across the 1990s. Many of its senior journalists have left alleging that the company is no longer a credible news organisation. Following the recent round of staff cuts, when ITN was obliged to cut £10 million from its initial bid - in competition with Murdoch’s Sky news - to provide news to Channel 4, some presenters complained that staffing levels were so low that they were obliged to operate the auto cue for fellow presenters when they were not themselves on screen.

At the BBC John Birt’s innovative system for allocating resources known as Producer Choice, left producers responsible for their own budgets, departments within the BBC competing with outside private companies to provide services for particular programmes and staff filling in tender forms for providing lighting for particular programmes rather than actually making programmes. During the reign of Birtism, BECTU estimate that the BBC shed 7000 staff (Franklin 1997).

One consequence of these cuts and the move to more “efficient” working practices, is to place remaining staff under increased time pressures. The need to service sub

regional opt outs, the growth in the number of BBC outlets means that pressures build. “There used to be deadlines... but with the advent of continuous (radio and television) news there is really now no such thing as a deadline. When the story breaks you’re expected to react to it and that is very stimulating but what it also means is that the pressure on journalists has increased enormously” (Cited in Ursell 2003). Whether news journalists can sustain quality of product in the face of such hiked up pressures must be questionable.

Another efficiency or cost saving has been the decline in journalism training which is conducted in house whether in print or broadcast journalism. Journalists are increasingly expected to bear the costs of their own education/training in journalism which is increasingly provided by University courses. In house training was typically conducted via the pedagogic approach of ‘sitting next to Nellie – in which a junior would learn from a senior experienced colleague: learning not only how to do the particular task but the culture of public service broadcasting – of working as part of a production team. But that senior layer of colleagues has been lost to redundancy and early retirement in the quest for efficiency. The conveyor belt of knowledge, experience and broadcasting culture which transmitted knowledge and values across professional generations has been snapped.

Calculability

For Ritzer, calculability implied an emphasis on what can be quantified, in which quantity rather than quality becomes the measure of value. The news media are obsessed with quantifying both their product and the time invested on particular tasks by their workforce. The national and local press is obsessed with circulation: it is the key indicator of success. In a very real sense it is crucial: circulation is proportionately related to cover price revenues and advertising revenues. But this obsession with circulation is more than a preoccupation with cash. Circulation has come to replace any judgement of quality. It is commonplace for editors to claim that if the circulation is rising or even holding steady then, “we must be getting something right”. When circulation isn’t rising, editors and managerial groups have increasingly resorted to dumping copies to create a perception of circulation growth. So special deals are available for students, free copies are dumped near railway stations and anyone who has flown recently knows that copies of the *Telegraph* and *Mail* are readily available as part of the service. Occasionally, newspapers will - like the *Birmingham Post and Mail* – make false or misleading returns to the ABC.

Pagination has also expanded since the mid 1980s: and prolifically. Between 1984 and 1994, the *Sunday Times* grew from 178 pages to 362, while the *Sunday Express* (32 to 184), the *Mail on Sunday* (64 to 220), the *Sunday Mirror* (48 to 120) the *Daily Express* (36 to 64) and *The Times* (32 to 72) all increased in size substantially (Franklin 1997, p. 90). Similar to the ambition of Big Macs, British newspapers are – in the words of the advertising slogan - “Bigger than ever, with more news than ever”. Like Big Macs, few claims are made for quality.

In television ratings are everything: again there is a genuine economic necessity here. With declining audiences come declining advertising revenues. But following the arrival of Greg Dyke, the BBC has allegedly become ratings obsessed: the battle for Saturday night audiences has become intense: the annual Christmas day battle for audiences between the BBC and ITV is a routine newspaper story early in the new year. The obsession with ratings was an inevitable outcome of the 1988 White Paper (*Broadcasting in the ‘90s: Competition, Choice and Quality* – note that quality comes in third place in the title of the white paper) and the 1990 Broadcasting Act which enthroned the audience as sovereign, and placed “popular” ahead of “quality” programmes in producers’ ambitions. Consequently in the 1990s at Yorkshire Television, the investigative

documentary series *First Tuesday* was junked in favour of ratings fodder such as *Holidays From Hell*, *Neighbours from Hell (Journalists from Hell???)*, *Shampoo* and *Airport*. This drive for ratings leads to a blurring of the lines between current affairs and entertainment evidenced by the “increasing insistence on fast cuts, odd camera angles, brief soundbites, dramatic music and gratuitous reconstructions” (Harcup 2000)

Predictability

The predictability and standardisation of the popular tabloid newspapers is signalled by their uniform designation as “Red Tops”: *The Star*, *The Sun* and *The Mirror*. All pursue similar news agendas. Red top McJournalism offers a fairly standard diet that is based around sport, celebrity, soap news, stories about reality television and its participants, crime and, interestingly, some political coverage. The whole mix is similarly sensational and typically illustrates what Marr denounced as the “sexualisation” of news. Nick Cohen describes the output as “shallow uniformity” and claims that “choice in journalism, as in so many areas, is a choice between hundreds of outlets packed with the same stock” (Cohen 1999, p. 126).

Occasionally the similarity of news agendas is striking. On the day that the Beckham’s second child was born, for example, the two biggest selling competitor tabloids carried a (literally) predictable, indeed, identical headline “Romeo, Romeo, Why For Art Thou Romeo?” (*Sun* and *Mirror* September 2002). On 10 April 2003, the British press reported the collapse of military opposition to coalition forces in Baghdad with a mind-numbingly uniform set of front pages. The *Mail*, *Sun*, *Express*, *Mirror*, *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *Independent* and *The Times*, with minimum variation, carried the same picture of a statue of Saddam Hussein being pulled to the ground by a chain attached to a military vehicle (doubtless provided by the same picture agency), captioned with the Subs’ punny word play “Toppled” or “The Toppling of Saddam”. This was, of course a highly significant event which newspapers are perhaps bound to foreground. But other less significant matters signal a growing uniformity. In 1998, for example, reports of Blair’s speech to the Labour conference, triggered identical headlines in the *Sun* and *Mirror*: both parodied one of Thatcher’s early soundbites, that “This Tony’s Not For Turning” (30 September 1998). Even in sports journalism the pressures towards uniformity and predictability of coverage prompt similar and occasionally, identical headlines: when footballer Stan Collymore scored a hat trick the *Sun* and *Mirror* both reported “Threes A Colly Good Fella (*Mirror*) Fellow” (*Sun*). Other examples abound. The belief of advocates of free market economics that competition generates diversity, is hard to sustain in the face of such examples of tabloid standardisation: Hotellings model of competition leading to uniformity, offers a better explanation of editorial conformity. McJournalism guarantees predictable journalism not quality journalism. Readers get the papers they expect: McJournalism offers few surprises.

One reason for this homogeneity of stories may reflect the tabloid press’ increasing reliance on public relations handouts to fill its pages. In one week of November 1998, for example the news agenda of every national paper (broadsheet and tabloid) was dominated by three stories: the conviction of Gary Glitter on sexual offences, the story about Jeffrey Archer and perjury and the birth of the Blair’s baby. On 23 November every national paper carried front page headlines about one of these stories while the other two featured prominently in editorial inside pages: Max Clifford brokered them each story and shaped its reporting in the press. Successful and effective PR specialists like Clifford control and manage the reporting of stories very tightly allowing journalists little room for pursuing distinctive story lines. The editor of PR Week claimed that as much as 50% of

some newspapers is derivative from public relations press releases (*Guardian* 13 May 1996, p. 10).

Tabloid formats are also standardised: big pictures and lots of them, colour pictures, lots of pictures, big print, big headlines, splashes, WOB headlines and extensive advertising sections, illustrated advice columns.

The local press also offers a standardised fare of McJournalism with similar editorial contents and formats. The local press is now almost wholly a tabloid press and the transition was achieved virtually overnight: the 4 years between 1993-97 witnessed a comprehensive metamorphosis. As if triggered by a coordinated signal, the editors of the local press marched *en masse* to the new standardised format. By 1997 less than a dozen of the 72 local evening papers still published in broadsheet format and half of these publish as tabloid on Saturday. In the regional morning press half of the 17 papers have shifted to tabloid (Griffiths 1997, p. 12).

In terms of content, local papers necessarily publish local stories and consequently in terms of their particular details these stories vary between locales. But certain story types prevail with human interest stories predominating. A number of local editors interviewed during the 1997 and 2001 general elections, for example, revealed their preference for human interest stories above election stories even during the course of the election. "The pressures of circulation are upon us," an editor explained. We would obviously love to have human interest stories day after day because we worry about becoming too boring for the public. They're very much keener about what they will buy. Reporting about schools, councils, that sort of thing, you might have got away with that sort of thing in the past, but now you have to look for good stories and the good stories which sell newspapers are tabloid stories. So for a couple of years now there has been big pressure on us to report these tabloid stories (Cited in Franklin and Parry 1998, p. 225). The fact that the paper had been taken over by the Johnston Press Group two years earlier perhaps signals the impetus towards standardisation and against diversity which group ownership can provide.

Other consequences of group ownership trigger standardised press formats. The economies to be derived from centralised subbing, have been mentioned. The result is that a single sub editor with no particular knowledge of the local area, may impose a uniform feel on local news reported in a number of local papers in the same group. Moreover the same stories and even the same readers letters may be published in different papers in the same local press group. A study of local press coverage of the 2001 general election discovered that letters which appeared in one local paper appeared in a sister paper owned by the same group some three weeks later (Franklin and Richardson 2002).

Resource starved local papers, moreover, like their national counterparts are increasing reliant on press releases from local government and other local sources. One study of a county council's success in placing stories in the local press revealed that 11 local papers in Northumberland published stories based around the same press release (Franklin 1994). But news management by government (locally and nationally) has subsequently developed apace leading to even greater standardisation of news. Journalist Peter Osborne claims a greater success for Alastair Campbell. Osborne recalls that Campbell distributed one press release – with Tony Blair's byline - which was published verbatim in 100 different local newspapers. The only change was the name of the town or city in which the paper circulated (Osborne, 1999). News management is ubiquitous: McJournalism is rampant!

Local commercial radio is perhaps the most obvious example of McJournalism. The absence of local journalists in the newsroom with hourly bulletins "fed" from IRN in London, guarantees identical news content: a single local story pasted into the national feed is all that differentiates the various local stations' output. Local radio is so

standardised in general programming (typically a classic gold popular music format) and so undistinguished in terms of its news content, that it is almost impossible to identify which station is playing (Franklin 1997).

Control

The introduction of new technology – a cause and consequence of staff cuts – has resulted in journalists and production workers' loss of control of their production in the workplace. Rupert Murdoch's move from Fleet Street to Wapping on 23 January 1986 marked a decisive shift in power and control in newspapers. He moved the *Sun*, *New of the World*, *The Times* and *Sunday Times* from Bouverie Street to a new non union plant in Wapping without any discernible disruption of production nor any consultation with the NUJ, NGA or SOGAT. The move allowed Murdoch to sack 5000 print workers (without notice) to cut his production costs substantially and to oblige his competitors to install similar technology or become uncompetitive and collapse. The introduction of this new technology had been strongly resisted by the trades unions but Murdoch's unilateral move spoke eloquently to journalists and production workers about their new position in relation to management in the production of news.

The new technology has promoted multi-skilling, which some observers have preferred to describe as de-skilling (Pilling 1998). Journalists input their own copy and have become production workers. The new computer based technology allowed journalists to "direct input" their copy, making many print jobs unnecessary and dramatically reducing costs. But the new technology also provided management with much greater control over the production process. Facsimile transmission allowed the physical separation of the editorial and production processes so that newspapers could be printed simultaneously at different sites. This was a particularly important development in the empowerment of owners and managers in tandem with trades union legislation outlawing secondary picketing. Journalists quickly came to understand that any control of the production process which they might have possessed had been radically changed by the new technology.

More recent developments in technology have had radical implications for journalism. The availability of high powered laptop computers, equipped with modems no bigger than a credit card, mobile telephones, and digital cameras mean that pictures and reports of events can – and must – be filed within seconds. Speed, accuracy and efficiency are the obvious benefits of such technology as a 1000 word story can be filed in seconds without the need of a copy taker (typist). The drawbacks of such technology are probably more evident to the copy takers than newspaper managers. But new technology also isolates journalists, makes them individuals rather than team workers, cuts them off from the collective news room culture, encourages and facilitates freelance work, reduces journalists bargaining power, encourages multi-skilling practices and empowers managers against journalists and other production workers.

In broadcast journalism the new technology with light compact digital cameras has prompted the introduction of the video journalist or VJ. The video journalists write their own scripts, interview politicians, record sound and picture, edit the material in the back of the van or on their way back to the studio and then introduce the package in a piece to camera. In this process of multi-tasking the quality of the resulting journalism inevitably declines. Other consequences are the loss of production jobs, increased pressures on the journalist, reduced costs for the news organisation and substantially reduced costs of training and replacement of journalists.

Irrationality

The manifest absurdity of this sustained and increasing emphasis on efficiency, calculability and predictability has been (paradoxically) that readerships of newspapers have experienced a sustained post war decline. A trend that is particularly marked for the Sunday tabloids where McJournalism is arguably most evident (Franklin 1997). A serious price war initiated by Rupert Murdoch a decade ago (but like Norris' postmodern election with its continuous campaigning, price wars may be a perennial feature of McJournalism), has improved the circulation fortunes of specific titles (e.g. *The Times* and the *Sun*) without increasing aggregate circulations of the national press. The sales increases at the *Daily Mail* across the last three years, which seem to buck this otherwise solid trend, are often attributed to the editorial skills of Paul Dacre but may reflect little more than the closure of the mid market tabloid *Today* and the redistribution effects of its readership to the other mid market paper.

Television fares little better. Overall viewing figures are in decline and those viewers who remain are watching less television than a decade ago: audiences moreover are increasingly fragmented. Most channels and most programmes (where figures are available to allow comparison) indicate smaller audiences (*Broadcast* 3 May 2002; Thomas and Hargreaves 2002). During 2001-2, audiences for Channel 3 fell off a cliff, prompting a crisis in advertising revenues for the channel. The new BBC Channel 3 has such small audiences they do not register on the standard industry measuring tools, while the BBC generally is so concerned about the declining audience figures for its news, current affairs and political programming that it has been engaged in a two year long extensive review of political coverage headed up by ex-*Newsnight* editor Sian Kevil. The new crop of political programmes emerging from that review have been savaged by politicians and journalists for the apparent "dumbed down" agenda they bring to the reporting of politics (Perkins, 2003, p. 6; McNamara 2003, p. 6).

Conclusion

I have tried to suggest that the discussion about the dumbing down of news media, which has generated heated debate between advocates and critics, might be clarified by using Ritzer's suggestive metaphor about fast food and McDonaldization to address the question of shifting news values and orientations in news programmes and news papers. A new style of journalism which may be dubbed McJournalism, which is characterised by efficiency, calculability, predictability and control via technology can be identified and is increasingly evident in news programming on both public service and commercial television as well as in all genres of newspapers. McJournalism is less concerned with a quality product than predictability and standardisation. McJournalism undermines the diversity which market theorists claim will emerge as a consequence of competition. McJournalism offers a dull, consistent, staple diet of programming which is obsessed with quantitative measures of "quality" such as ratings: McJournalism delivers the journalistic equivalent of Big Macs but is less concerned about Quality Macs. McJournalism increasingly produces newspapers with similar contents and on occasion identical headlines, lead stories and pictures provided by the same picture or news agency. In the local press, reduced numbers of journalists, the power of local advertisers, the increasing reliance on information subsidies from local government and other PR agencies, similarly delivers a homogenous product: from Land's End to John O'Groats, McJournalism delivers the same flavourless mush.

Two consequences follow from the emergence of McJournalism. First, there is evidence of increased "force feeding" of readers and viewers with a relentlessly *uniform*

and *predictable* diet of news presented in ever more *uniform* formats. Predictable news, of course, is an oxymoron?). Second, there is also evidence of an increased “spoon feeding” of news in ever more *accessible* formats exemplified by the new range of political programmes on BBC.

The Politics Show which replaced the Sunday programme *On The Record* in January 2003, has eschewed the set piece extended interview with a senior politician and includes an animated South Park-style cartoon, employs a gag writer and presenters and guest appear without ties to attract the younger viewers. Reviewing the “opening of the first edition of BBC’s new, viewer-friendly, youth-oriented, *The Politics Show* the Chair of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, described the programme as:

unpromising, with tuneless buzzing music accompanying a totally incomprehensible logo... Presenter Jeremy Vine followed with a numbingly unfunny joke about Stephen Byers... Vox pop interviews were accompanied by satisfactory soundbites from two has beens, the Lords Hattersley and Tebbit, and one never-will-be, Oliver Letwin... There followed a kind of spoken essay, by a sweater clad pundit, on the philosophy of war, filmed – I kid you not – on location from Churchill’s bed in the Cabinet war room... *The Politics Show* came to a merciful, if belated end, with a ghastly animated cartoon and soundtrack (parts of which were happily inaudible). In farewell, Vine balefully promised: “We’ll be back next week.” I shan’t (Kaufman 2003, p. 8).

The new day time programme *The Daily Politics* which airs three times a week in a mid morning slot, has “bombed in the ratings” starting at 300000 viewers but slumping to 200000 after the first three weeks of programming. Fran Unsworth who heads political programming blamed “the follow-on audience from the Teletubbies” for the poor audience figures (Perkins 2003, p. 6). The late Thursday programme *This Week*, which broadcast for the first time on 16 January 2003, is anchored by Andrew Neil who discusses the politics of the week with regulars Michael Portillo and Dianne Abbot while William Hague and Tony Benn debate controversial subjects head-to-head in a programme format called “Bill and Ben”.

Perhaps unsurprising then, that one “irrational” outcome of McJournalism, with its emphasis on efficiency, is that the customers are no longer willing to enter the restaurant. There are lots of empty seats: the menu must improve. Short-term bargain buys and special offers have failed to seduce the customers back to try the newly launched flavours. A more fundamental dietary change is necessary.

Coda

A managing director was given tickets for Schubert’s unfinished symphony but was unable to attend: he gave the tickets to his quality manager. Next morning the director asked the manager if he had enjoyed the concert and was handed the following typed memo:

For considerable periods of time the four oboe players had nothing to do. The number should be reduced and their work spread over the whole orchestra, thus eliminating peaks of activity. All twelve violinists were playing identical notes. This means unnecessary duplication and the staffing of this section should be cut drastically. No useful purpose was served by repeating, with the horns, the passage that had already been played by the strings. If all such redundant passages were eliminated the concert would be reduced from two hours to twenty minutes. If Schubert had attended to these matters in the first place, he would probably have been able to finish the symphony after all

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