



Is Qualitative Research Becoming McDonaldized?

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Abstract

The contention put forward by Ritzer (1993) that the McDonald's restaurant has become the model for the extension of bureaucratic and Scientific Management principles to diverse areas of contemporary social life has seized both the popular and the sociological imagination. The term 'McDonaldization' has entered both academic and lay discourses, and its four component themes of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control are seen as embodying current manifestations of an inexorably self-extending process of standardization. Of course, Ritzer's thesis has not gone uncontested, and has been the object of a number of important critiques. One of the areas to which Ritzer and others have applied the concept of McDonaldization is higher education, but in doing so there has been a tendency to emphasize teaching rather than research. It is the primary purpose of this article to explore the utility of the concept of McDonaldization for the understanding of certain aspects of qualitative research in sociology. As such, a sociological concept is being turned back onto the academic community to explore whether it can illuminate an aspect of the research process.

Keywords: McDonaldized, McDonaldization, High Education, Modularization, University, Sociology

McDonaldization in the contemporary university

Several writers have argued that modern universities have been undergoing a process of McDonaldization in terms of management structures and modes of organization, as well as in the delivery of teaching (e.g. Parker and Jary, 1995; Prichard and Willmott, 1997; Lilley, 1998). Thus, in the UK, such writers point to the modularization of degree programmes and the assessment of teaching quality, coupled with the benchmarking trend and regular programme reviews, as providing support for the suggestion that the modern university is undergoing McDonaldization. Some of these initiatives have been externally inspired (for example, teaching quality assessment), while others have been internally inspired (for example, programme reviews) but often with an eye on their significance for external audits.

When the issue of McDonaldization is raised in relation to research, it is invariably in negative terms. Furedi (2002: 34) has suggested that the McDonaldization of UK universities that has been perpetuated by external

audit agencies has led across disciplines to, among other things, what he refers to as ‘meaningless research’. The Research Assessment Exercise in the UK is seen by commentators such as Furedi as particularly instrumental in promoting McDonaldization. Such views are applied mainly to the organizational frameworks within which research is increasingly conducted in the UK, rather than to the research process itself. However, we intend to use the sociological research process in the UK as a specific ‘case study’, in the context of which the question of the McDonaldization of the university can be addressed.

McDonaldization and sociological research

In this section, we will employ US sociology as a starting point. We will then proceed to examine the UK situation which has some distinctive features of its own but which, we will argue, is also susceptible to similar pressures.

Ritzer (1998) is quite emphatic in his contention that American sociology has become McDonaldized. He writes: ‘sociology can be seen as simply another aspect of the modern world and ... it, like almost all others, is undergoing a process of McDonaldization’ (Ritzer, 1998: 37). He makes several points in support of this suggestion. While he argues that sociology textbooks and sociological theory have undergone McDonaldization, of particular interest to this paper is his suggestion that sociological research is similarly affected. However, the case Ritzer presents for the McDonaldization of sociological research applies more forcibly to empirical work carried out in the quantitative tradition than to work carried out in the qualitative tradition. We will now assess the relevance of each of the four principles of McDonaldization in the context of quantitative work. We will then go on to argue that these principles may also be exerting an increasingly significant influence on qualitative work.

Calculability

This dimension of McDonaldization entails an emphasis on the quantifiable and on the significance of quantity rather than quality. Ritzer sees sociological research as implicated in calculability in several ways. One is that ‘there is an overwhelming emphasis in the major journals on studies that rely on quantitative, rather than qualitative, data or that are strictly theoretical in nature’ (Ritzer, 1998: 38). He suggests that in American sociology qualitative studies are typically viewed as ‘anachronistic’ and are rarely found in the major journals. He argues that calculability is also likely to be found in the preference for large samples rather than small ones. Calculability is further enhanced by the routine application of highly standardized and conventionalized statistical procedures. Because of the difficulty of making judgments about the quality of a qualitative study, ‘journal editors are more likely to pass when it comes to publishing theoretical essays or qualitative studies’ (1998: 39). Calculability is also apparent in the tendency for journal articles to be of a standard length (neither too long nor too short) and for American sociologists to emphasize the importance of publishing large numbers of articles.

Predictability

Predictability can be seen in the fact that ‘all research articles have a predictable format – review of the literature, hypotheses, methodology, results, tables, interpretation, conclusion, footnotes and references’ (1998: 40). The review process employed by journals tends to encourage and reinforce this form of predictability. In addition, the tendency for journal articles to be of a given length, as noted under calculability, adds to the predictability of the form and the presentational style of the sociological research article.

Predictability can also be seen in relation to certain aspects of the research process which Ritzer does not discuss. One of the goals of some areas of quantitative research is to provide researchers with the means to predict. The family of techniques involving regression, for example, was developed in order to equip social

scientists with this capacity. In like fashion, it is often suggested that one of the yardsticks for establishing measurement validity is *predictive* validity. More fundamentally, it is sometimes argued that because quantitative research is an essentially structured approach to data collection and analysis, once set in motion the contours of the findings likely to be derived from it are predictable. While the *content* of the findings may surprise, the *character* of the findings in a quantitative investigation is unlikely to surprise, so the *nature* of the findings can be broadly predicted.

Efficiency

Efficiency refers to the best possible means to an end. Ritzer finds evidence to suggest a push for efficiency in the fact that the clear, predictable pattern of journal articles means that they can be read by experienced sociologists with little effort. It is much easier to form judgments about articles that have a format that is well known and easy to digest. From the point of view of authors too, the standardized journal article reporting sociological research is highly efficient. Given the existence of a more or less fixed template, authors know which components need to be included and the order of their presentation.

In a sense, the quantitative research process is itself quite often construed as being self-evidently efficient. Greene and Caracelli (1997: 13) have observed that post-positivism, which is the epistemological foundation of much quantitative research, ‘characteristically advances values of efficiency and utilitarianism’. Decisions about sample size and type, and about such issues as whether to employ, for example, structured interviewing or a postal questionnaire as the data collection method, are based on a combination of considerations in which appropriateness, cost, time constraints, availability of trained personnel, and other issues of feasibility are brought into play and traded off against each other.

Control

Ritzer (1998) concentrates on evidence of control through the use of non-human technologies. He argues this evidence can be discerned in ‘the computer, the computer program, and the use of increasingly sophisticated statistics’ (Ritzer, 1998: 41). Moreover, this aspect of McDonaldization underpins the three other aspects because it ‘makes studies more quantitative in character, more predictable since large numbers of people have access to the same non-human technologies, and more efficient to produce since a good deal of what one needs is in those technologies’ (1998: 42). Here, Ritzer focuses more explicitly on the research process than he does with the other three dimensions of McDonaldization. This aspect of McDonaldization can be seen in the widespread use of statistical packages and techniques.

Control more generally is often a key feature of quantitative sociological research. For example, the experiment provides a highly controlled context in which terms like ‘control group’ and ‘random assignment’ are indicative of a high level of researcher-driven influence over the process. In survey research, the use of standardized instruments like structured interviews, coupled with the use of closed questions, points to an approach to the research process that seeks to control the range of variation in the answering of questions.

In addition, quantitative researchers in the survey tradition frequently write about ‘controlling’ extraneous variables. Thus, in one of the classic statements of the elaboration method of multivariate analysis, we find comments such as: ‘The procedural aspect of the key phrase “were it not for” is to *control on*, or *hold constant*, the test factor, thereby eliminating its influence on the relationship’ (Rosenberg, 1968: 24, *emphases in original*). More generally, these aspects of research are written up in a manner that is indicative of a management metaphor (Richardson, 1990).

Control over the research process is therefore an integral ingredient of much quantitative research and some aspects of it are also buttressed by the use of nonhuman technologies. This latter aspect is being intensified as

the use of computer-assisted interviewing and Internet surveys (both Web-based and by email) become more prominent (for example, Couper and Hansen, 2002).

Thus, quantitative sociological research generally can be seen as exhibiting the key features of McDonaldization. However, there is an important difference between the McDonaldization of teaching and the McDonaldization of research. Unlike in teaching, in research the McDonaldization process is not necessarily directly driven by management, in the sense of the imposition of explicit, compulsory procedures. Rather, 'management' in the guise of university managers, the funding bodies, etc. creates a state of what might be termed 'institutional McDonaldism.' This consists of a set of norms, expectations, and guidelines which provides the 'frame' within which research can be conceived, funded, carried out and published. These norms embody the central principles of predictability, calculability, efficiency and control. Forms of research that are consonant with these principles, and which fit within the framework of 'institutional McDonaldism', will tend to be selected for, will be funded, and hence will proliferate.

Qualitative research in UK sociology

Thus, Ritzer makes a compelling case to suggest that sociological research has become McDonaldized, although his argument applies mainly to quantitative research and to articles based on that approach. In the classic accounts of the nature of qualitative research, an impression is typically given that it does not exhibit the characteristics of McDonaldization.

While sociology in the UK exhibits some similar features, some important differences can also be discerned. Arguably, the most significant of these differences is the fact UK sociology has not in recent decades exhibited the same emphasis on quantification as its American counterpart. Indeed, Bechhofer (1996) has shown that the pattern of publication of empirically based research in UK sociology journals has tended to emphasize the qualitative approach. This finding is also supported by research by Payne et al. (2004).

From the classic accounts of qualitative sociological research, it is clear that this tradition, with its emphasis on such features as flexibility and lack of structure (Bryman, 1988), exhibits characteristics that are not readily susceptible to McDonaldization, and may actually be antithetical to its four principles. However, we will argue that in the UK context there are indeed McDonaldizing tendencies in the qualitative research context, despite the tension and apparent lack of fit between the traditions of qualitative work and the demands of the four principles. We can now examine principle by principle this lack of fit.

Calculability

Obviously, qualitative research does not emphasize quantification, although qualitative researchers sometimes make use of simple counting (Silverman, 1985) and they almost unavoidably tend to employ quasi-quantitative terms, such as 'more', 'many', 'rarely', 'sometimes', and 'often'. Moreover, to take an issue specifically raised by Ritzer, concerns about sample size do not loom as large in qualitative research. In qualitative investigations, a large sample does not necessarily imply a good sample (though arguably it does not in quantitative research either, where it is the way that units are selected from the population that is the key issue). Instead, in qualitative studies, the emphasis tends to be placed upon the theoretical relevance of the sample. Sampling concepts deriving from grounded theory, such as theoretical sampling, are oriented to the quality of a sample in terms of its relevance for theory rather than to statistical criteria like absolute size, randomness, etc. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Predictability

The overall research approach associated with qualitative work tends to be loosely structured and relatively open-ended, though there is a good deal of variation in this respect. The overall effect of this feature is to make qualitative research relatively unpredictable, sometimes in terms of how the research is done but more

particularly in terms of its outcomes, in relation to both their form and content. Qualitative researchers often write about changing direction in the course of their investigations or about generating surprising findings. Grounded theory is supposed to involve an iterative approach in which the researcher gathers new slices of data during a study as a result of emerging hypotheses deriving from earlier data collection (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Since the research directions that are taken during the course of a study cannot be fully anticipated at the outset of a project, it adds to a sense that outcomes of grounded theory, an approach that is frequently referenced by qualitative researchers as the foundation of their data analysis approach, may be inherently unpredictable.

Moreover, Ritzer's (1998) observation that the format of the sociological research article is highly predictable probably applies better to quantitative research publications than to qualitative ones. For example, the rise of journals dedicated to publishing articles discussing or based on qualitative research has meant that qualitative researchers publishing in such journals have been less constrained by the conventions of the quantitative research article format. Indeed, the rather unstructured nature of much qualitative research, in which research questions may arise during the course of as well as at the beginning of investigations (see discussion of 'Control' below) makes the traditional article format less suited to qualitative research. Further, qualitative researchers, as part of their self-consciousness about issues of representation through writing, have been more prone to experimentation with different writing formats than quantitative researchers (Richardson, 1994). Consequently, it is likely that Ritzer's suggestion that sociological research articles tend to have a uniform format does not have the same force in relation to the publication of qualitative research. However, his proposition that articles tend to have a predictable length probably does apply to qualitative research articles, though this almost certainly has more to do with the constraints that publishers impose upon journal editors than with the intellectual demands of communicating research findings to an appropriate academic audience.

Efficiency

It could be argued that qualitative researchers are typically less preoccupied with decisions relating to efficiency than quantitative researchers. Qualitative research is not devoid of such considerations but they play a less central role. As noted in connection with calculability, it is the quality of the theoretical ideas that are generated from the data that are key considerations rather than whether efficiency criteria are met. Issues regarding the selection of research methods have less to do with efficiency than with the importance of seeing through the eyes of one's research participants, or grasping the context to allow a thick description of a culture. Moreover, in qualitative research, research questions tend to be less explicit than in quantitative research, so that the notion of fitting methods to research questions is less tightly defined. Indeed, in some forms of qualitative research, most notably conversation analysis and discourse analysis, the approach can look decidedly *inefficient*, as it entails the painstaking examination of the minutiae of talk, such as pauses and hesitations. Indeed, it might almost be argued that the intuitive *verstehende* aspects of qualitative work, upon which its insights crucially depend, require a more inspirational approach which cannot be routinized and standardized. In fact, this inspirational aspect might be compromised by an over-emphasis on efficiency.

Control

It is unsurprising in view of the discussion of the three previous dimensions of McDonaldization that qualitative research should be seen as relatively difficult to subject to close control. It is frequently viewed as more naturalistic than quantitative research because of the lesser use of tightly structured research instruments. Participant observation is probably the qualitative research method that comes closest to this attribute in that the goal is to interact with members of a social setting *au naturel* and largely without the intrusion of structured instruments. The semi-structured or unstructured interview is probably the most common technique employed by qualitative researchers. Such an interview usually embraces a range of degrees of structure in the data collection process, but the researcher typically aims not to constrain interviewees excessively and to

leave as much of the answering of questions as open as possible in order to minimize control over interviewees. In addition, the qualitative researcher has less control over the research process because he or she has to follow up leads and findings that emerge in the course of investigations, precisely because a degree of control of the content and process of research is deliberately handed over to respondents.

Moreover, there has been a tendency for nonhuman technologies to play a less significant role in qualitative than in quantitative research. Qualitative research is usually depicted as requiring less hardware and software because it does not have the equivalent of complex statistical techniques that are difficult to implement without the aid of statistical packages. The qualitative researcher may use audio- and increasingly video-recording hardware, but these are seen by them not so much as means of control through nonhuman technologies, as adjuncts to their craft. Much more significant is the rise of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) which will be discussed in further detail below.

Overview

The main argument of this section is that qualitative research can be viewed as less McDonaldized, and even regarded as less *McDonaldizable*, than quantitative research. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research emerges as a less routinized approach which exhibits greater variety in its nature and forms. In the next section, however, we will argue that there have been several developments that may have the potential to move qualitative research in a similar direction to quantitative research.

McDonaldization and qualitative research

In this section, we identify three key aspects of qualitative research practice where McDonaldization may be making inroads, despite the idea that qualitative work can be seen as inherently less susceptible to the determined and exacting application of the four principles. These three areas are respectively: the development of increasingly explicit quality criteria; the attempt to formalize qualitative data analysis techniques; and the increasing use of qualitative data analysis software. To some extent, the developments we identify are not specific to the UK context and can be seen as deriving from and affecting qualitative work elsewhere. However, our emphasis will be on the UK context.

Quality criteria

Many qualitative researchers have rejected the quality criteria with which traditional, quantitative research is associated, which are usually subsumed under the umbrellas of reliability and validity. Qualitative researchers have been uneasy about these criteria since they are viewed as deriving from a research paradigm inappropriate to the kinds of investigations in which they engage. This position presents a difficulty for qualitative researchers because it could be taken to mean that they are indifferent to the quality of research, or even worse, that qualitative research may be unreliable and invalid (Mason, 2002). These are not positive public relations messages to send out, as they could hinder career development and the ability to secure research funding.

In response, some qualitative researchers have become increasingly interested in specifying quality criteria that are specifically suited to the nature of their investigations (Seale, 1999). What began as a trickle of discussions of quality criteria in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1992) has turned into a deluge of attempts to lay out approaches to the evaluation of qualitative investigations (e.g. Mays and Pope, 2000; Yardley, 2000; Whittemore et al., 2001; Morse, 2003; Anastas, 2004). These various sets of criteria are very controversial, in that there are frequently alternative opinions voiced suggesting that they are inappropriate or too difficult to apply (for example, Barbour, 2001; Sparkes, 2001). However, the burgeoning of a movement seeking criteria for the more systematic appraisal of qualitative research is unmistakable. Particularly striking is a framework for assessing quality in evaluation studies using qualitative research

produced for the UK Government Chief Social Researcher's Office, a branch of the Cabinet Office (Spencer et al., 2003). While the main focus of this group of researchers lay with evaluation research based on qualitative research, their framework is equally applicable to qualitative investigations more generally. The report drew on two main sources of data: firstly, twenty-nine existing frameworks which aimed to specify quality criteria for qualitative research, and secondly, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with researchers in universities and government departments, and with representatives of funding bodies. In the preface to the report, the Government Chief Social Researcher writes of the framework that it 'provides a useful and useable guide for assessing the credibility, rigour and relevance of individual research studies' (in Spencer et al., 2003: 3). The resulting framework includes a large number of criteria that collectively have the appearance of a checklist. Eighteen criteria, or 'appraisal questions' as they are called in the report, were derived. Examples are 'How well defended is the sample design/target selection of cases/documents?' and 'How well has the approach to, and formulation of, the analysis been conveyed?' Each of the 18 criteria subsumes several 'quality indicators' that give greater specificity to the 'appraisal questions'.

It is impossible to know what significance such a model of the evaluation of quality holds for the future of qualitative research, but given the proliferation of approaches it would seem that there is a definite momentum within the qualitative research community in the UK and beyond towards the creation of formal guidelines for assessing quality. Such guidelines would then have an impact upon at least some qualitative investigations, as researchers would need to exhibit conformity to the 'good practice' laid out in such guidelines in order to secure research funding and perhaps, increasingly, to have their work published in refereed journals.

Such a development could indeed signal the emergence in the UK of a McDonaldisation process. Calculability might become more evident in that there may be drift towards increasing the number of assessment criteria that have to be met, and towards 'scoring' research on the number that are complied with. The very emphasis on the *number* of criteria that are fulfilled might itself be construed as indicative of calculability. Predictability might also be particularly increased, as the use of such criteria might foster conformity to a set of practices that would create greater uniformity in how qualitative research is designed, implemented, and reported. It could be argued that the use of explicit, formalized criteria would create greater efficiency in that researchers would be able to point to their conformity with certain practices in order to demonstrate the quality of their work. Also, the practices would provide a clear starting point for researchers applying for funding and beginning investigations, as well as for funding bodies judging grant applications. Finally, the need to ensure that certain practices are followed may step up the amount of control that the qualitative researcher needs to exercise over the conduct of investigations, and over his/her respondents, interviewees, etc.

Qualitative data analysis techniques

In the past, the approach to the analysis of data by qualitative researchers was rarely described and there were few if any guidelines as to how to proceed. New researchers (and often experienced ones too) would be confronted with a mound of rich data, usually transposed into textual form, with few pointers about what could be made of it all. In response to this feature, it could be argued that there is a push in some quarters towards a more explicit specification of such procedures.

In the introduction to their influential text on qualitative data analysis, Miles and Huberman (1984) noted that approaches to analysis are rarely discussed in reports of research. They felt that 'the field of qualitative research badly needs explicit, systematic methods for drawing conclusions and for testing them carefully – methods that can be used for replication by other researchers, just as correlations and significance tests can be by quantitative researchers' (1984: 16). Their book was intended to outline a diversity of such 'explicit, systematic methods' which could be used by other qualitative researchers. Such a development, with its emphasis on enhancing the standardization of the analytic approach, can be construed as consistent with

McDonaldization. An example of the analytic techniques they recommend is the use of matrices. Thus, a checklist matrix includes a listing of key themes each of which is examined in terms of different subgroups in the sample. The resulting cells include either quotations or points regarding how each subgroup relates to each theme. A time-ordered matrix connects behavioural patterns with periods. Each cell shows the position of each pattern in terms of where it stood with each new time period.

Further evidence of this trend can be found in the later work of Anselm Strauss. In his later writings on grounded theory, Strauss sought to inject greater explicitness into the grounded theory approach that he was responsible for co-founding. This later work (e.g. Strauss and Corbin, 1990) routinizes grounded theory practices to a far greater extent than in previous expositions of the approach.

These more structured approaches to qualitative data analysis have the potential to push qualitative research in the direction of McDonaldization. Most notably, the predictability of the outcomes of qualitative investigations would increase following the introduction of more structured approaches to analysing data. Also, journal referees may come to expect more explicit statements of analysis procedures, leading to articles being more standardized than has typically been the case. More structured approaches can also be regarded as improving efficiency in that they provide explicit guidelines about how to approach qualitative data, so that the researcher need no longer be confronted with large amounts of data without codified analysis practices to draw upon. Control is likely to be enhanced as researchers structure the way research is conducted to conform to the analysis guidelines. In addition, calculability may also be increased. For example, standardized techniques may enable to estimate more accurately the amount of work likely to be entailed in data analysis and encourage them to count themes that are identified.

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS)

Like the adoption of explicit data analysis procedures, the use of CAQDAS is controversial (Fielding and Lee, 1998). Indeed, the two points are related, in that it is frequently argued that the use of this software necessitates a greater explicitness about analysis. Qualitative researchers who prefer a less structured approach to analysis are likely to prefer not to use such software. As one of the designers of two of the best known CAQDAS packages – NUD*IST and NVivo – has observed, such software is often disliked because it is viewed as rigid and as forcing the analyst to work in a particular way (Richards, 2004).

Like more formalized approaches to qualitative data analysis, CAQDAS too can be depicted as consistent with the McDonaldizing process. Calculability is evident in that there is often a belief among practitioners that the software encourages quantification or at least the use of frequency as an indicator of the salience of analytic themes (e.g. Mason, 2002: 164-5). It is efficient because it is less time-consuming than manual ‘code and retrieve’ and ‘cut and paste’ processes, not least because it can perform complex searches that are difficult with manual methods (such as Boolean searches). Because the style of analysis that is encouraged by CAQDAS is typically structured (though this varies between the generic types of CAQDAS – seen Lee and Fielding, 2004), the predictability of both the process of analysis and the form of the outcomes of analysis may be enhanced. Finally, CAQDAS exemplifies control of the research process, particularly in the form of the use of nonhuman technologies. Its reliance on the computer and software makes it in this respect analogous to statistical packages used in the processing of quantitative data.

Overview

The evidence presented in this section appears to support the proposition that some aspects of qualitative research in sociology are being subjected to McDonaldization. As in the case of quantitative research, this is not a process crudely imposed from the outside. Rather, certain crucial methodological and ‘technical’ innovations within qualitative research, generated by academics themselves, appear to have a better ‘fit’ with institutional McDonaldism’s principles than do more traditional qualitative techniques. Such innovations will

therefore be 'selected for' when it comes to research design, research funding and report preparation. This may also apply to publication, if journal editors begin to apply to qualitative papers similar criteria of 'publishability' to those they apply to quantitative papers. Gephart's (2004) comments on the problems of publishing qualitative research articles in the *Academy of Management Journal* in the USA provide an indication of the ways in which such articles might be nudged in the direction of quantitative criteria of publishability.

The foundations of the three ways in which qualitative research is becoming McDonaldized are different. In the case of CAQDAS and more structured approaches to qualitative data analysis, the push emanates largely from a sense of their greater efficiency. As such, the primary impetus comes mainly from within the academic community. More structured approaches to qualitative data analysis have the advantage of offering a degree of transparency of method in connection with an aspect of qualitative research that is often criticized for its opacity, namely how data are actually analyzed (Gephart, 2004).

In the case of the formulation of quality criteria, the impetus also comes from within the academic community, but not as a means of improving the efficiency of qualitative research but in order to provide a platform for the demonstration of its integrity. This may improve the credibility of qualitative research for gaining research funding (Morse, 2003) and possibly enhance its influence on policy-makers, particularly within the 'audit culture' that increasingly pervades higher education (Shore and Wright, 2000). Customized criteria allow qualitative researchers to argue more convincingly that their work is rigorous. In such circumstances, the deployment of tailored criteria represents a solution to problems like being able to secure funding for projects when funding bodies are unsympathetic to qualitative research because of its apparent failure to conform to quantitative research criteria (Morse, 2003).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that even within the apparently unpromising milieu of qualitative sociological research, McDonaldizing tendencies can be discerned. The degree to which they are having an impact on practitioners' practices is an issue that will only come clear with the passage of time. Our point is that the three developments we identify have the potential to push qualitative research in the direction of at least a modicum of McDonaldization. It is possible that some of the developments referred to in this paper will not have a great impact on the working practices of qualitative researchers. In other words, to use a clichéd phrase, it may be that there will be a gulf between the rhetoric and the reality of their use.

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