Going Down Market? The Evidence on Tabloidisation

Down the drain?

As the Corporation’s chief archivist said to me when I first joined: ‘You do understand, don’t you, the BBC has been accused of dumbing down from the day Reith invented it.’

(Dyke, 2005, p. 160)

One thing that most commentators might agree on is that the media cannot adequately serve democracy if, in the process of covering politics, it trivialises events and developments or ‘dumbs down’ its content. The result would be to degrade British culture and debase public debate. And this would be, at least for the broadcasters, an abdication of their public service responsibilities, as generally understood. In recent years there has been a growing concern that there has been what can be characterised in general terms as the ‘tabloidisation’ of press and television coverage. Commentators have been critical of what they see as a general erosion of British culture, with headlines like ‘BBC Accused of “Dumbing Down” Political Coverage’ (Financial Times, 19/9/02) or ‘End of Risk TV?’ (Guardian, 15/12/03). The broadsheets see this as a threat to informed debate and, therefore, to the democratic process. The claim is that ‘serious’ topics like foreign affairs are neglected (‘Bell Accuses ITN of Dumbing Down’, Guardian, 19/2/02) and that infotainment and the trivialisation of politics have become the norm (Hunt, 1999). If these accusations are correct, they represent a serious threat to the body politic. The more lurid claims have an apocalyptic tone, suggesting that if the media pander to the three-minute culture and citizens are fed a remorseless diet of trivia, sleaze and celebrity, the civic culture that
sustains democracy will be seriously and irremediably damaged or degraded. Tabloidisation is, the critics argue, a pernicious aspect of the media’s recent evolution, and one that is an unambiguous threat to democratic norms, values and practices. The accusation is a serious one and clearly needs some exploration.

The academic debate on tabloidisation is a little more subdued in tone, and the claims that are made are more measured. However, one important point to note is that the charge that we are experiencing significant dumbing down or trivialising of content is not a new one. It has, in fact, accompanied almost every major change in media structure in the last 100 years. The launch of the brazen and unapologetically populist *Daily Mail* in the 1890s is a case in point. More worrying in respect to public service television, this claim was made on the arrival of the ITV in the 1950s and on the advent of multichannel broadcasting. This sort of claim often goes hand in hand with the notion of a ‘golden age’, where the public were adequately served by an effective and public-spirited media. But critics of this position point out that this age never, in fact, really existed (Barnett, 1998; Greenslade, 2003). The tabloidisation thesis is also criticised for its reliance on casual observation and anecdote, rather than a systematic analysis of news or media content (Hargreaves, 1999). Tabloidisation, in this view, is perhaps little more than a synonym for perceived ‘bad taste’, and the term may be inherently subjective or, perhaps, even patronising.

One of the main problems in the debate is that if we are to assess whether democracy is, in fact, in danger from media tabloidisation or the rise of ‘infotainment’, we need to be able to define what precisely we are talking about. Sadly, not only is there no consensus in the literature on what constitutes tabloidisation or what characterises infotainment, but there are a bewildering and confusing array of features that are associated with this supposed dumbing down of politics. Some authors identify whole genre of programmes, such as ‘docusoaps’, talkshows and magazine programmes (Blumler, 1999) or ‘advertisorials’ (Bromley, 1998). Others focus more on the topics covered, and here a wide and disparate set of issues figure in different studies. A fixation with personalities, personal histories, human interest and vox pop figure widely, as do stories that focus on issues which are dramatic, spectacular or which involve catastrophic or tragic events (Bromley, 1998; Brants, 1998; Barnett, 1998; Hvitfelt, 1994; Barnett et al., 2000; Winston, 2002). Standard infotainment fare also includes the royals and other showbiz celebrities – often in the context of scandal, sex or general prurience (Esser, 1999). Finally, too great an emphasis on sport and