When it comes to what is good for the public mind and body, the choice is a fairly simple one: mass values vs elitism. Let's give some examples: Big Brother vs Mastermind; Hollywood blockbuster vs art-house cinema. Former head of the BBC, Lord Reith, stated unequivocally that, 'to apply broadcasting to the dissemination of the shoddy, the vulgar and the sensational would be a blasphemy against human nature'. Yet, that is precisely what broadcasting has done in the bid to attract ever-increasing numbers of listeners and viewers. But is this necessarily blasphemous? Was Lord Reith not just simply being elitist, condescending and paternalistic to oppose sensationalism, shoddiness and vulgarity, or was he foreseeing the dumbing down of morality, education and civility?

Who sets the agenda?

The fundamental question really is who actually sets up the agenda. Does the mass of mankind determine what it wants to do and how it should behave and then expect the media to follow suit, or does the media exert the pressure, which dictates the way the masses will react? Does the intelligent minority come into the picture at all nowadays, or are they a relic of the past? It is the British way to cut down the tall poppies, just as they did in the French Revolution. One view is to hell with elitism, the elite are pompous, pretentious and an anachronism – let the masses decide! Yet, others think not: is this not a dereliction of duty, a case of the inmates running the asylum?

How does this affect the practice of dentistry?

One way that this has affected the profession is in the realm of fitness to practise, where we are no longer judged solely by our peers, but now by at least an equal number of lay people, who intelligent though they may be, tend to be the voice of prevailing mass opinion rather than the dental elite, possessors of expert knowledge. We would not want the passengers to be flying the plane when pilots are on board.

Another is that we spend at least five to six years learning anatomy, pathology, physiology, pharmacology and a few other 'ologies' in order to be purveyors of dental health and healers of pain. Dentistry as a noble vocation practiced by an elite minority who are elite because they have paid their dues by their diligence. Yet this is not what the masses seem to want from us today. What they want is straight white. Straight white is not the main thrust of what we learn in dental schools, but it is undeniably the main thrust of Extreme Makeover and the like. People who resent paying private fees for preventive, reparative and restorative dentistry will unhesitatingly fork out greater sums so that can look like the movie or television star of the moment.

Yes, one could and perhaps should say thank heaven for that, because we have become too good at the old preventive game and are cutting our own throats in the process. As long as mass values determine the agenda we should just take the money while we can before the masses decide that it's not actually necessary for dentists to be doing these activities in the first place and allow technicians, hygienists, nurses, beauty therapists and your Aunt Sally to be doing the same things, all in the name of unfettered competition and freedom to choose. Forget the need to inform, educate, inspire and protect the masses. As long as someone can do it cheaper, that's fair game.

Are you for or against mass values setting the agenda for dentists? Would your patients think it a positive move? Email jury@dentaltribuneuk.com and let us have your views.