How has the rise of infotainment based reporting in UK tabloids affected the practice of journalism?

Context
In Britain, during the late nineteenth century, taxes on the press were progressively reduced. Meaning newspapers became an important commercial enterprise, thriving on sensationalist stories. The ‘new’ wave of journalism demonstrated ‘a shift away from parliamentary and political news to sport, gossip, crime and sex.’ (Weiner, 1988; cited by Thussu, 2007).

The mix of entertainment and news has gone beyond “infotainment,” but is now adjusted to the use of social media. The tabloids select content based on the consumer popularity, typically these are entertaining and human interest stories. (Altheide, 2013)

Articles in which elements of information and entertainment are mixed are generally expected to appeal to the politically less interested reader. In the modern day more tabloids and magazines are beginning to cover topics such as politics and global affairs, so long as they include entertaining elements to attract a larger readership, (Brant, 1998)

When defining infotainment note that it refers to a grab bag of styles, formats and sub-genres whose only common feature is that they fall somewhere in the space between the two traditional pillars of reading, information and entertainment. (Stockwell, 2004)

Key Texts
When examining the relation between the popularity of articles and their writing style, popular articles tended to be more readable. Lending further weight to what Franklin (1997) refers to as the growth of ‘infotainment,’ an appetite for softer news stories. Their findings suggest possibility that the language of hard news is as much a deterrent to readers as the content. (Flaounas, I, Ali, O, Lansdale-Welfare T, De Bie, T, Mosdell, N, Lewis, J & Cristanini, N (2013). Drawing a similarity with the work of Van Zoonah (2000) who also agrees that infotainment allows for the restore of relation between people and their representatives, regaining necessary sense of community. On the contrary, in context of tabloidization, Esser (1999) finds that extensive coverage of scandals can increase general disillusionment with public life and may indeed have some negative effects on democracy.

Connell (1998) suggests fabulous reportage doesn’t pretend to be news discourse, therefore should not be measured by the same criteria. He further this by stating there is little evidence to suggest that infotainment has affected popular tabloids’ news discourse, which remains closer to broadsheet news discourse than usually thought. Rooney (2000) opposes this view and concludes that tabloids such as the Sun can no longer be referred to as newspapers. As their readers are content with entertainment stories, as well as articles that relate to everyday life. Further to this Uribe and Gunter (2004) used content analysis on the ‘Sun’ along with McLauchlan and Golding’s conceptual lens of ‘tabloidisation’ (2000) to find evidence of increased ‘tabloidisation’ in news coverage when taking form and style into account.

Finally, Dueze (2005) found that after interviewing tabloid editors, they believe they “proclaim their attachment to the professional values that define the journalistic ideal.” Which is opposed by Sparks and Tulloch (2000) as they discuss vigorous competition that commercial news outlets face, forcing editors to scrutinise their practices and focus their product on the needs of their audience.

Methodology
Combining Woods & Kroger’s (2000) definition of discourse analysis with Van Dijk’s (1993) view as to the purpose of critical discourse analysis, will provide the initial research required for this study. Firstly, examining the wording of tabloid ‘soft news’ stories concerning human interest topics, identifying any colloquialism’s or informal words or phrases. Secondly, conducting a similar search upon tabloid ‘news’ stories covering serious topics. Then comparing the results from both sets of research to identify any emerging patterns or similarities.

Using Krippendorff (2013) and Weber (1990) to formulate the process, content analysis will provide quantitative data to the study. Assembling the number of articles that are considered ‘infotainment’ within the last five year period. Studying print and online articles of UK tabloids to compare number of infotainment stories reported on with their coverage of news stories. Separately, on each article recorded, collect engagement with article, shares, comments, likes etc. This can then be used to compare with the qualitative data.

Interviews (semi-structured) with UK Tabloid Editors.
Research will conclude with these specific interviewees, to try and understand the reasoning for their methods. Questions will focus on their practice of infotainment and whether they believe this is affecting the quality of their journalism.

Ethical Considerations
As a studying journalist I have progressively started to dislike the practice of infotainment. Stories exploiting the everyday tasks of reality stars continue to make the headlines of the tabloids, this may be my opinion but there is still a large percentage of the population who enjoy reading these articles. So, when conducting my research I must refrain from bias.

Strengths
- This is a contemporary issue.
- Covers main areas of infotainment, popular journalism, tabloid ‘popular’ and ‘news’ discourse.
- Combination of methods allows detailed research.

Weaknesses
- Limited access to archived content that would be required to conduct a fair study.
- The study would take a very long time to complete by myself.
- Tabloid editors agreeing to interview will be difficult. Without a high number of interviewees, information gained may not lead to an accurate conclusion.

References