UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Letters to the Editor in Eighteenth-Century France: An Enlightenment Information Network, 1770-1791

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in History

by

Elizabeth Andrews Bond

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Timothy Tackett, Chair
Professor Ulrike Strasser
Associate Professor Sarah Farmer

2014
DEDICATION

To my parents, Gail and Keith, and my grandparents, Doris and Ed, Marjorie and Paul, and Milton.
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CURRICULUM VITAE
Elizabeth Andrews Bond

University of California, Irvine
200 Murray Krieger Hall
Irvine, CA 92697-3275

email: eandrews@uci.edu

EDUCATION

2014  PhD, University of California, Irvine, History.
2009  MA, University of California, Irvine, History.
2008  MA, Arizona State University, Comparative Politics.
2007  BA, Arizona State University, History and Political Science.

POSITIONS HELD

2013-present  Visiting Scholar, The Ohio State University School of Communication.
2012  Instructor of Record, University of California, Irvine French Program.
2011  Instructor of Record, University of California, Irvine Department of History.

PUBLICATIONS

Journal Articles
“‘A l’Auteur du Journal’: What Letters to the Editor tell us about the French Enlightenment.”
Perspectives on Europe. Volume 41:2 (Fall 2011).

“Between Auteurs and Abonnés: Reading the Journal de Paris in 1787-1789.” Proceedings of

Book Chapters
Hoekstra, Valerie, Miki Caul Kittilson and Elizabeth Andrews Bond. “Gender, High Courts and
Ideas about Representation in Western Europe” in Representation: the Case of Women.
Michelle Taylor-Robinson and Maria Escobar-Lemmon, eds. Oxford University Press.
(2013).
HONORS & AWARDS

2013       University of California Irvine School of Humanities Conference Travel Grant.
2012-2013  AAUW American Fellowship dissertation writing fellowship.
2012       Friends of the Princeton University Library Research Grant, funded by the Council on the Humanities.
2011-2012  Fulbright Fellowship to France (Affiliated with the Université Paris 1 (Panthéon-Sorbonne) and l’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales).
2011-2012  Bourse Chateaubriand Fellowship (declined).
2010       Council for European Studies Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Pre-Dissertation Fellowship.
2009       University of California Irvine School of Humanities Conference Travel Grant.
2008-2009  University of California Irvine Regent’s Fellowship.

CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION

Panels Organized


Papers Presented


TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor of Record, University of California, Irvine

2012  La France transformée: l’histoire de France du 18e siècle (French Department)

2011  World History: Beginnings to 1650

Teaching Assistant, University of California, Irvine

2011  World War II Era
       Judaism, Christianity, Islam (Religious Studies Department)

2010  The French Revolution
       World History: 1650-1870
       Problems in European History: Monsters and Borders in Early Modern Europe

2009  Problems in European History: Monsters and Borders in Early Modern Europe
INVITED TALKS


RESEARCH LANGUAGES
French       Read, speak, write fluently
Spanish   Read, speak, write fluently
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Letters to the Editor in Eighteenth-Century France: An Enlightenment Information Network, 1770-1791

By

Elizabeth Andrews Bond

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Irvine 2014

Professor Timothy Tackett, Chair

My dissertation presents a new approach to the history of the Enlightenment: the examination of letters to the editor published in French newspapers at the end of the eighteenth century. This rich, and previously overlooked source, allows me to explore one of the most difficult problems in cultural history: how the literate population understood and responded to the intellectual debates of their age. My dissertation is designed to render a more nuanced understanding of how the eighteenth-century French public understood the important ideas of their day. Informed by theoretical studies of public opinion formation and networks analysis, my work examines the structures through which readers consumed, debated, and transmitted information before and during the Revolution. I argue that the existence and impact of information networks, like letters to the editor, were at least as important to the spread and impact of the Enlightenment as were the specific publications of writers such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau. Thus, the Enlightenment should be understood not as a canon of philosophical and political ideas, but as a new psychology and epistemology, a spirit of optimism about the human capacity to know the world and change society.
Introduction

HISTORIOGRAPHY

The Age of Enlightenment is generally understood as a period of intellectual liberation, when individuals began thinking for themselves and "daring to know," as Immanuel Kant put it, without depending on outside authorities, like the state or the Church. But while the scholarship is extensive on the major figures of the period, the *philosophes*, relatively less is known about how literate members of the society received and understood their works and how they may or may not have used them during the French Revolution. Earlier generations of scholars often assumed a trickle-down process, whereby the great works produced by eighteenth century philosophers were increasingly read by the population, which was won over by their ideas and subsequently used them to make a revolution. Seminal works by Ernst Cassirer and Peter Gay forwarded this approach, which posited that ideas were born from the minds of great men, and their autonomous works then spread to a passive public.\(^1\) While some intellectual historians like Jonathan Israel continue to follow this approach,\(^2\) many recent historical studies questioned a simple cause and effect relationship between the Enlightenment and the Revolution, and critiqued the focus on ideas without regard to the political, social, and cultural context within which such thought was constructed and received. Inspired in part by the earlier work of Daniel Mornet, historians have explored the complexity and contradictions of the Enlightenment.

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experience and sought to locate the spaces where ideas were consumed, circulated, interpreted, and finally accepted or rejected.³ A collective study directed by François Furet looked at the publication of books in the eighteenth century, and discovered a broad diversity of topics, beyond the writing of Rousseau and Voltaire, that included science, geography, history, literature, and even theology.⁴ Taking into account books published outside Paris, the best sellers of the century may well have been on religious subjects. Studies by Margaret Jacob and others have shown how Masonic lodges, once thought to have been seedbeds of Enlightenment dissemination, often remained eminently hierarchical in nature, with various segments of society commonly segregated in separate lodges.⁵ Antoine Lilti’s massive thesis revealed that most Parisian salons also had little to do with the Enlightenment but were primarily spaces for aristocratic flirtation, gambling, political maneuvering, and general sociability.⁶ A celebrated article by Robert Darnton further complicated our understanding of the French cultural world on the eve of Revolution by drawing attention to the Grub Street writers who passionately challenged established social and cultural hierarchies, in part because they themselves had been unable to succeed within the system.⁷ More recently Jeremy Caradonna, building on earlier work by Daniel Roche, has examined the essay contests sponsored by regional Académies, arguing that the writings of the participants can provide additional insight into the experience of

³ Daniel Mornet, Les origines intellectuelles de la révolution française (1715-1787) (Paris,: A. Colin, 1933).
the Enlightenment. As this corpus of work suggests, since the 1970s, historians of the Enlightenment have shifted from a focus on “the” Enlightenment as a set of ideas, to an evaluation of the political, social, economic, and cultural contexts in which such ideas were produced. Robert Darnton’s article on the social history of ideas in Enlightenment studies was foundational to this approach. Subsequent research has focused on the sites of production, exchange, and debate through which ideas circulated and evolved.

This pivot away from a conceptualization of the Enlightenment as a canon of thought created by great thinkers and toward the context within which ideas were created has led historians to question the very existence and meaning of “the Enlightenment.” The historiographic focus now lies with the processes of early modern knowledge production. And it is within this framework that this dissertation was written. Charles Withers has asserted in his study of natural knowledge that the Enlightenment was not a defined set of self-contained ideas, but rather a locally situated phenomenon, “concerned in different places and in different ways with different conceptions of practical reason.” Laurence Brockliss has argued that no consensus exists on the origin, content, or membership of the European enlightenment. David Sorkin’s comparative study of religious philosophers in the eighteenth century argues that the intellectual and religious reform undertaken by spiritual leaders in various denominations, each with their own goals, might best be understood as Enlightenments, rather than a single, coherent

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Enlightenment project. Their work on knowledge production has shifted the historian’s gaze to the local, the practical, and the connected ways in which information was made, shared, contested, and used. E. C. Spary’s argument for Enlightenment as process, and Caradonna’s understanding of Enlightenment as a contestatory culture preoccupied with practical aims serve as two recent examples of the general trend in the historiography of the Enlightenment today. For the historian, the challenge remains to locate sources that speak to the ways that ideas circulated, and were then debated and interpreted. Newspapers provide a unique window into processes of information exchange, which were preoccupied with the practical, local impulse that historians like Withers and Caradonna have identified.

Compared to the book trade, salons, academies, and Masonic lodges, eighteenth-century newspapers and their role in the spread of new ideas have received significantly less attention. Scholarship that examines the relationship between readers and published texts at the end of the eighteenth century has examined print in a range of forms. Among those who have focused more specifically on Old Regime newspapers, Jack Censer and Jeremy Popkin have shed light on the content of pre-revolutionary papers, demonstrating that these publications gave voice to an

increasingly critical and political readership. Perhaps the single most important study is Gilles Feyel’s survey of the Old Regime French press throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Feyel argued that the eighteenth century in general was a transformative moment in the history of newspapers. Over the course of the late eighteenth century, the information press equipped a growing population of readers with a new capacity to judge and understand the information they were presented on science, history, philosophy, and current events. In addition, Jeremy Popkin, writing on the Gazette de Leyde (printed outside France for French consumption), and Jack Censer, tracking the French provisional press, have placed particular emphasis on the articles that appeared in such newspapers, which conveyed the cautious opinions of an editorial staff but provided little room for the opinions of the readers, themselves. Previous studies, then, have focused almost exclusively on articles published by the editorial teams of the various newspapers. No one has examined what is perhaps the single most creative and revealing element of such papers: the letters to the editor. The lack of research in this area is especially unfortunate since we know from studies by Dena Goodman, Roger Chartier and others that correspondence can provide an exceptional touchstone to the thoughts and ideas

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articulated by literate elements of society. Studies by Timothy Tackett, moreover, have shown that letters can be especially revealing for the transitional period from the Old Regime to the French Revolution.

**INTERVENTION OF THIS DISSERTATION**

This project offers a novel approach to the history of Enlightenment in France: the examination of letters to the editor published in French newspapers during the late eighteenth century. This rich and previously ignored source allows me to probe one of the most difficult questions in cultural history: how did larger segments of the literate population participate in the intellectual debates of their age? At the same time, an exploration of this source sheds light on the formation of a public sphere, and the dramatic transformation of attitudes at the end of the Old Regime and the beginning of the French Revolution.

The study of such letters is especially revealing since the eighteenth century was an epistolary age par excellence. While private correspondence was a popular pastime for much of middle and upper class society, thousands also pursued this practice publicly by submitting their letters to local newspapers, and engaging their fellow readers in dialogue. The placement of

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20 Jürgen Habermas’ influence is present in this dissertation as a general heuristic, rather than in a detailed evaluation of the merits of his claims. Habermas’ *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* has been critiqued extensively for its lack of relevance to eighteenth century sources, the groups that it ignores, and the teleological nature of the argument. The critiques in Craig Calhoun’s edited volume outline much of the limitations of Habermas’ work for a study of the eighteenth century French press and its readers. Craig J. Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992). Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).
letters in the information press, a media still in its infancy during this period, bore some similarity to the experience of the Internet: a massive proliferation of information in a new media converged with a growing population of literate users who chose not only to consume ideas, but also to contribute ideas of their own. More than the solitary musings of individuals, the letters represented an ongoing conversation between readers and newspaper editors, and among readers themselves. By the beginning of the French Revolution, the exchange of published letters to the editor had evolved into a vibrant and dynamic communication network. Indeed, in their study of the Revolutionary Press, Pierre Rétat and Claude Labrosse have asserted that, in some cases, letters to the editor represented the central contribution of the newspaper. Rétat and Labrosse are among the rare historians to mention letters written to the editor before or during the French Revolution.21 In fact, the solicitation of letters was a long-standing practice for many of these papers, one that was undoubtedly amplified by the outbreak of the Revolution. The publication process was, to some extent, a means of filtering the content of letters and directing the paper’s message. In Rétat and Labrosse’s view, the general political inclination of a paper’s editors may be read through the letters that they selected to publish. Labrosse and Rétat’s comments on these letters’ significance focus on three main types of information communicated in these letters, but they do not evaluate who wrote the letters or the messages conveyed by the letters. They assert that the letters tended to fit into three main categories: stories and anecdotes; projects and reflections; and denunciations and justifications. Labrosse and Rétat contend that in 1789, the liberty of the press provoked among other consequences, an active and massive eruption in political debate amongst the public, and in the representations of social life that had

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appeared impossible and unthinkable.\textsuperscript{22} Their work focuses on the French Revolution, when much of the newspaper industry and the views of the readers had been transformed by political change. The present study focuses, instead, on the Old Regime.

This project combines the insights of Rétat and Labrosse about the editorial staff with an evaluation of the identities of the readers, and the thoughts of the readership expressed in the letters that they submitted to the editors, thus providing a fuller picture of the relationships between the reader and the text. The varied content, writing styles, and locations where letters were published all indicate that the letters to the editor published in the Old Regime press were penned by a wide range of individuals. While it is possible that editors penned, altered, or shortened some of the letters that appeared in their newspapers, the diversity in prose and content makes it nearly impossible that all of the content was produced by the small editorial staffs of the papers. Writers’ motivations in taking this popular pastime public likely varied, as did the content of their letters. By tracking the signatures used in the letters, many of the writers could be identified. The contributions to local papers came from a mix of previously published authors and otherwise unknown writers. While the majority of the contributors were identifiable individuals, it is also likely that some of the anonymous or pseudonymous content that appeared in the paper was plagiarized, or that fictional content was reprinted entirely or in emulation of other epistolary works meant for entertainment, like letter-writing manuals or novels. In some instances, such letters were rather obvious—they made up fantastical stories that sounded more like Voltaire’s imaginings than like the majority of the letters that were preoccupied with the demands of daily life. In other instances, it is possible that the writer took on an archetypal persona—a curé, a farmer, a woman—in order to present an opinion, or try out an argument that

they had read elsewhere or that they had invented. Certainly, the question of a writer’s sincerity and identity, and of the originality of their letters merits further investigation. Furthermore the juxtaposition of earnest letters and counterfeit ones does not preclude one or the other from investigation in this dissertation.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

As a means to conceptualize and problematize the study of letters to the editor, this work builds on the approaches of German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas and of British political scientist Benedict Anderson. Both have provided theoretical insight into the written word as means, and the press as a place, for the creation of a sense of community. In light of their theoretical framework, one may understand the letters to the editor as a community engaged in a social project that sought to know, to debate, and sometimes to change society. Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* pinpointed the eighteenth century as the critical moment in the birth of a public, critical culture. For Habermas, the culture of the “public sphere” or Öffentlichkeit was a space where ideas were shared, articulated, contested, and negotiated. Such a public sphere assumed an equality of status amongst its members, shared common concerns, and adopted an inclusivity that allowed debate and information to be shared. In my view, newspapers provided an essential locus for such a culture of Öffentlichkeit. Both Habermas and Anderson situated the formation of public opinion within the eighteenth century, asserting the centrality of print and debate to the development of a public sphere. Anderson’s book, *Imagined Communities*, emphasized the links between collectives of individuals who never actually met face-to-face but formed a community through the shared practice of reading. The nation is the imagined community that directly concerns Anderson, but his work suggests

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23 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. 
the possible existence of a range of other communities, where shared interests and common values knit together groups that would not otherwise have known one another. Indeed, for Anderson, the birth of such a community would have been impossible without the advent of “print capitalism.” A shared vernacular language, a shared experience of synchronous time, and a shared consumption of information could bring disparate groups together through the experience of reading newspapers.24

SOURCES

The findings are based on approximately 3,500 letters printed in 16 Parisian and provincial newspapers during the last two decades of the Old Regime. They consist of the first Parisian daily, le Journal de Paris, the Parisian affiches, le Journal général de France, and a number of provincial affiches, produced once or twice a week for a more local audience in Angers, Arras, Beauvais, Caen, Dijon, Grenoble, Metz, Orléans, Poitiers, Rouen, Toulouse, and Troyes. The sources were collected from the Bibliothèque National de France, the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, the Bibliothèque de l’Institut d’Histoire de la Révolution Française, and bibliothèques municipales and archives départementales in Poitiers, Toulouse, Amiens, Lyon, Aix-en-Provence, Marseille, Caen, Troyes and Dijon.

Based on the most complete finding guide available, Sgard et al.’s Dictionnaire de la Presse, the following list of some forty-four affiches that were published between 1770-1788 (some of which continued to publish during the French Revolution) were identified. The newspapers are displayed below on a timeline, which provides a visualization of the longevity of various affiches in comparison to one another.

Figure i.1: Timeline of Affiches Published in Eighteenth-Century France, by City of Publication, 1770-1791

Key:
- **Green**: Affiches analyzed in the dissertation
- **Blue**: Affiches collected, but not yet analyzed in the dissertation
- **Red**: Affiches consulted, but did not contain letters to the editor
- **Yellow**: Affiches not analyzed in the dissertation; not held in Parisian depositories

The newspapers analyzed in the dissertation are indicated in green: these papers were selected, because they included a number of letters. They were either available in their entirety in the Bibliothèque National de France (BNF), or based on the promising nature of the sample in Paris, I collected additional materials from the bibliothèques municipales in the provinces where the
collections were more complete. The newspapers in blue were also very promising, so I collected those on provincial trips as well. They have not yet been coded and added to the dataset consulted in the dissertation, owing to time constraints. The red newspapers are held, at least in partial collections, at the BNF. The collections available in Paris were all consulted, but they contained very few if any letters to the editor. As a result, they were ruled out from further investigation in provincial libraries. The yellow newspapers were not included in my dissertation, because they were either: not held in Parisian depositories; the extant collections in bibliothèques municipales were incomplete; the papers, in general, had shorter runs of just a couple years; or Sgard et. al’s Dictionnaire de la Presse did not indicate a prevalence of letters in the newspapers.

The provincial collections of affiches that were consulted for this dissertation were chosen to provide a sense of the regional diversity of the Old Regime press in France. As the map below indicates, the newspapers were published in greater numbers in the north and east than in the south and west. Nevertheless, in an effort to explain both larger trends and regional particularities, provincial research trips were undertaken to collect letters to the editor from a number of newspapers unavailable in Paris. The map indicates all of the locations where affiches were published during 1770-1788. The green dots are the affiches in my dissertation. The red dots are affiches that did not regularly print letters, at least based on the sample available at the BNF. The blue dots indicate affiches that I have collected but not yet analyzed. The yellow dots indicate affiches that are not included in the dissertations, owing to the logistical difficulties related to collecting those newspapers. Every possible effort was made to sample the newspapers published in regions of France that were not held at the BNF. Trips to Caen, Amiens,
Poitiers, Dijon, Lyon, Marseille, Aix-en-Provence, and Toulouse were undertaken to collect the most complete series of provincial affiches possible.

Figure i.2: Provincial Affiches Published in Old Regime France, 1770-1788

Key:
- Green: Affiches analyzed in the dissertation
- Blue: Affiches collected, but not yet analyzed in the dissertation
- Red: Affiches consulted, but did not contain letters to the editor
- Yellow: Affiches not analyzed in the dissertation; not held in Parisian depositories
As the map demonstrates, the density of newspapers was much greater in the north and east than in the west and south. In general, the newspapers echo the line between a more literate northeast and a less literate southwest that François Furet and Jacques Ozouf identified.\textsuperscript{25}

The study begins in 1770, when a number of these newspapers began publication. The provincial affiches had existed in various towns as early as the 1750s, but many of these papers were unable to sustain their publication, and they shut down within a couple years of their first edition. By 1770, the provincial newspaper market had changed, and royal privilèges allowed printers and editors in towns throughout the kingdom to undertake the enterprise of a newspaper with the assurance of a monopoly on the local market. By 1775, approximately twenty affiches were publishing. By 1789, forty-four towns had an affiches of their own.\textsuperscript{26} Estimates of the total readership of the provincial affiches throughout France during this period are 500,000. This figure is not based solely on the extant subscription records that Marc Martin was able to locate (which tended to number the total subscriptions of a particular newspaper in the few hundreds). He also took into account an assessment of the reading practices of the period, where people would congregate to read in institutions that made such newspapers available, like libraries, reading rooms, academies, cafés, or workshops.\textsuperscript{27}

The forum of letters to the editor offered the possibility of presenting ideas in print to individuals from a much broader segment of society than those who published books and pamphlets. The analysis of this source allows for a more expansive understanding of the experience of Enlightenment culture to include a substantially larger community of readers and

\begin{itemize}
\item Furet and Ozouf, \textit{Lire et écrire : l'alphabétisation des Français de Calvin à Jules Ferry}.
\item Marc Martin, \textit{La presse régionale : des affiches aux grands quotidiens} (Paris: Fayard, 2002).
\end{itemize}
writers. The letters to the editor can thus serve as a remarkable touchstone for how elites thought about their society in general and about certain popular subjects in particular, especially science, medicine, and social welfare.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed draws on a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. A database of all of the letters was constructed, which listed a number of descriptors for each letter, including the publication date and date of submission; the name, profession, and residence of the author; and the topics treated. The construction of this database has allowed for a more accurate and complete understanding of change over time within the forum of letters to the editor. In particular, such analysis was used to construct a prosopography of the letter writers, an overview of newspapers’ publication habits, and in-depth analyses of two major themes taken up by the letters under the Old Regime, namely popular science and social welfare. Finally, this quantification made possible comparisons of Old Regime newspapers that continued to publish during the first three years of the Revolution.

The corresponding qualitative analysis consisted of a detailed examination of changing sentiments through the use of rhetoric, imagery, and metaphor. The modes of argumentation, the voice of the author, and the extent to which the letter was addressed to an audience of fellow readers were each evaluated. Furthermore, this project examines how writers characterized themselves; and how differences of social status and gender—salient distinctions among such a diverse reading and writing public—may have been reflected in the messages articulated. Letter writers included an extensive community of literate society, from men of commerce and artisans to clergy, scientists, doctors, farmers, and women. Indeed, it is clear that those writing letters represented a much broader segment of society than those publishing books or pamphlets, the
“Republic of Letters” assessed by Robert Darnton. This diverse reading public submitted their thoughts on a striking variety of themes: provisions for social welfare, implementation of new technologies, suggestions for agricultural stability, personal testimonies about medical remedies, and improvements of public spaces figured prominently within their conversations. Once the Revolution began, the letters to the editor generally became much more politicized; nevertheless, the diversity of issues addressed in the correspondence persisted at least through 1791. More generally, the analysis of letters to the editor suggests that the Enlightenment should be understood not as a canon of philosophical and political ideas, but as a new psychology and epistemology, a spirit of optimism about the human capacity to know the world and change society. The correspondence vividly illustrated the more practical working out of this process—the efforts of men and women to find pragmatic solutions to the difficulties of daily life.

The findings are based on the letters published in sixteen provincial general information newspapers, known as affiches, and their Parisian counterparts. The newspapers were selected in order to give a sense of the regional diversity of France in the last decades of the Old Regime. They are the result of an exhaustive inventory of the affiches and journaux available in Parisian depositories, which was then complemented by research trips to municipal libraries throughout France that maintain extant copies of the affiches that were published in the town. The selection of the provincial sites for further investigation was aided greatly by Jean Sgard’s Dictionnaire de la Presse, a massive bibliographic work undertaken collectively by researchers throughout France.

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Taken together, the letters printed in the sixteen affiches and journaux number more than 3,500 letters to the editor. Each chapter examines a portion of these letters, in order to provide a portrait of the overall content of the papers’ published correspondence. Using a case study approach that samples select years and select newspapers during a twenty-three year period allows for an assessment of both change and continuity. It also ensures that each chapter remains focused on a close reading of the source material, rather than subsuming the vivid language of letters in a predominantly quantitative project. Indeed, much of the richness of this source base rests in the ways that men and women articulated their responses to what they were reading and experiencing. The ways that they framed their ideas and defended their positions grant the historian a window into the mentalités that shaped the last decades of the Old Regime and the early years of the Revolution.

An investigation of the press also requires an evaluation of the newspaper as a material object that circulated in a marketplace. In Paris, le Journal de Paris provided information about important activities in the city and surrounding provinces. The capital’s first daily, le Journal consisted of four pages that compiled news on a variety of topics ranging from the weather, university lectures, and government business, to excerpts from literature, changes in address, and notices of marriage. Amongst the many types of information assembled in this brief daily paper, letters written “aux Auteurs du Journal” figured prominently. Readers wrote to the paper to share their thoughts about a range of issues: sometimes they responded to events taking place in Paris—the actions of the nobility, performances at the theater, or events in the streets of the city. Elsewhere they suggested ways to improve health, educate readers about new technologies, and
provide funds and services to the poor, hungry, and orphaned. They also entered into debates—disputing facts printed in the paper, countering with their own evidence, and submitting it for the public to judge. These letters gave voice to the literate population of Paris in the last decades of the Old Regime, and they continued to do so into the Revolution.

Already by the paper’s second week of publication in January 1777, the *Journal de Paris* began including letters written from its readers. Over the course of the paper’s first year, some 318 letters were printed. Seven were printed in the first month, and they tended to focus primarily on the arts: providing perspectives on the opera, publicizing a particular painter, or drawing attention to new translations of literary works. As time passed the range of concerns that writers expressed in their letters grew, along with the total number of monthly letters. The first five months of the *Journal de Paris* saw the number published each month increase to 21 in April, and then nearly double in May. For the rest of the year, the monthly totals ranged from 23 at its lowest to 48 at its peak. In the following years, the editors continued to print letters in a rather consistent manner, including at least 20 each month. Letters then became a regular fixture of the paper, and the range of topics covered continued to grow. The editors were clearly eager to publish the thoughts of their subscribers.

*Le Journal de Paris*’ provincial counterparts shared a similar format, although their publication schedule was less frequent. The provincial newspapers were known as affiches, a shorthand for the publications that were usually entitled, “les annonces, affiches et avis divers de” Toulouse, Troyes, or Lorraine et trois Évêchés, for example. The four-page format of the papers allowed the local editors and contributors to publish goods and services for sale, upcoming events and spectacles, reports on current events, general interest pieces, and of course, letters to the editor. Like the letters to the editor that appeared in the Parisian journal, the contributions to
provincial newspapers covered a panoply of topics: a report on a fire that had damaged a nearby
town, a review of a recent book or pamphlet, a suggestion to improve agricultural practices in the
généralité, an effective remedy to cure the sick, a short verse or story to entertain the public, a
description of a beneficent act, a demonstration of new technology, a sketch of the city’s roman
history, occasional government reports, or the genealogy of a noble family in the region. Like
their Parisian counterparts, provincial readers wrote in to share their opinion, and to debate their
fellow readers. Editors also weighed in on some of the published correspondence, providing a
note du rédacteur at the end of the letter to corroborate the writer’s claims, to attest to the
writer’s good character, or to solicit a response from the public.

The publication of the provincial affiches differed from the Parisian journaux in a few
noteworthy ways. First, the provincial affiches tended to be smaller operations, which
sometimes consisted of just one or two people: a rédacteur who arranged and edited the content
of the paper, and the printer who published it. Perhaps owing to the rather limited staff of such
operations, the affiches appeared on a weekly or bi-weekly schedule, which made the provincial
papers less timely and less apt to print hundreds of letters than their Parisian contemporaries.
Furthermore, the letters that they did print tended to come from elites in the province: noblemen,
lawyers, doctors, intendants, and clergy were among the most frequent contributors. For their
part, the editors argued in their notes du rédacteur that they were only willing to print letters by
individuals who were known in the community, and who would stand by their letter. It is very
likely that the less frequent publication schedule, and the existence of only one newspaper in the
town allowed for greater government scrutiny of the affiches’ content. Local intendants were
responsible for censoring any political content from the newspaper. The cautious, conservative
approach of the editors in the provinces reflected their self-interest in wanting to maintain their
privilège to print. Most affiches began publishing in the 1770s, and continued their publication into the early years of the Revolution. In the early 1770s, the number of letters to the editor remained low, and the letters tended to be written by well-known members of the community. Less than fifty letters were published each year until 1777. By the early 1780s, though, letters to the editor had become a more robust, consistent presence in the provincial newspapers, especially in Dijon, Grenoble, Metz, Poitiers, and Toulouse. By the mid-1780s, there were nearly forty affiches in publication, and letters written by subscribers were regularly published.

The Parisian journaux and provincial affiches have received attention from historians in the past for their valuable role in the marketplace, in social welfare projects, and in the spread of Enlightenment ideas. Certainly, such publications were not the swiftest way to receive news about political events—the gazettes had a monopoly on reporting on domestic and international political events, and most Frenchmen and women relied on illegal newspapers that were ostensibly published abroad, on private correspondence, or on oral communication networks for their news. Letters to the editor were not significant because they were especially newsy. Rather, the decades-long influence of the information press provided French readers with habits of mind that allowed them to make sense of the juxtaposition of information; that acclimated them to a culture of contestation and debate; and that motivated them to respond in critique and occasionally in action. The content of the letters conveyed the mindsets of an educated French

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30 In Paris, the rapid, daily schedule of le Journal de Paris seems to have made it more difficult for the censors to keep up. When le Journal de Paris’ editors did overstep the censor’s restrictions and printed content deemed too political in content, the privilège of the newspaper was temporarily suspended. Journal de Paris, La Révolution française au jour le jour (Paris,: Éditions Les yeux ouverts, 1967).

public that was curious about the world, interpreted the age as one of progress and growth, and implemented practical improvements to daily life as a result of that interpretation. Indeed, the letters to the editor do not convey a canonical Enlightenment or a radical Enlightenment. Instead, the forum of these letters was a site of knowledge production, driven by an optimistic, practical impulse.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The study is divided into two major sections. The first two chapters set out the general structures of the late eighteenth century information press, and the letters that it published. This section draws on the entire source base of over 3,500 letters in order to provide an overview of who wrote letters and why, and to investigate how the information in the letters circulated throughout the kingdom. It investigates how readers understood their act of writing a public letter, and how they imagined the community to which they wrote. It also evaluates the extent to which the writers’ assumptions were born out by the publication practices of the newspapers’ editors. Finally, this section provides a sense of general trends and regional diversity that characterized the information press in the two decades preceding the French Revolution. The second section takes a thematic approach. Chapters devoted to popular science and medicine, and to social welfare projects demonstrate the ways that letter writers took part in public collaboration and debate with their fellow readers. The forum of letters to the editor was a site of knowledge production, but one that fed on a variety of perspectives and levels of expertise. Indeed, it was perhaps the lack of consensus on these subjects, and the range of perspectives on such topics that made the letters to the editor such a prolific, vibrant space for observation, contestation, and critique.
Chapter One addresses the social make-up of the letter writers to the eighteenth century French press, and it explores why such individuals chose to pen public letters. A prosopography of the more than 50% of letters that gave an indication of the writer’s profession reveals a diverse group of contributors. Drawing on comparative studies of letters to the editor in contemporary journalism, and research on published correspondence in the eighteenth century world, the chapter investigates why contributors presented themselves in the way that they did, either by concealing or revealing an identity. Finally, theoretical works on eighteenth-century epistolarity—in the form of private letters, epistolary novels, and letter-writing manuals—are incorporated in order to develop a theoretical frame for the performative act of writing a public letter.

Chapter Two investigates the extent to which the newspapers did facilitate the responsive, contestatory, collective environment that the letter writers in chapter one imagined. Employing networks analysis techniques, it presents a study of reprinting processes and information transfer, a practice that has been well studied in histories of the press in other times and places. Using techniques developed by networks scholars, I present a new method and visualization for information transfer in 18th century France.

Chapter Three explores the letters that engaged with popular science and medicine. From the dramatic innovations of the Montgolfier brothers’ hot air balloons, which captivated the public’s imagination, to practical implementations designed to improve daily life through health, sanitation, and nutrition, this chapter maps popular attitudes about scientific knowledge. The optimism conveyed in letters concerning scientific discovery stimulated public imagination, generating ideas about transforming society. This chapter also evaluates the various groups who wrote letters concerning science and medicine to their local paper, engaging the historiography
of the history of science and expertise.\textsuperscript{32} The newspapers reflected the public’s engagement with a cultural phenomenon that was both spectacle and tangible, innovative and practical.

Chapter Four focuses on letters that called for readers to take action through philanthropy in order to improve society. The chapter profiles the social groups who most frequently contributed letters on social welfare projects. Philanthropic efforts were understood under two categories: that of charity, an act of Christian love and duty that usually consisted of almsgiving or caring for the sick, poor, or orphaned; and that of bienfaisance, a secular act done out of compassion for one’s fellow man. The historiography of charity and bienfaisance has tended to view the eighteenth century as a period of transition, during which an increasingly less devout French public was no longer motivated by the Church’s precepts, so the public acted instead out of a more secular, humanist impulse to improve society.\textsuperscript{33} This chapter evaluates the extent to which this historiographic argument reflects the mentalités of French readers. For most readers, imagining a completely new society, like the one that the Revolution would create, was impossible. Nevertheless, public service efforts reveal the ways individuals sought to enact change beyond the auspices of Old Regime institutions, both through written critique and organized action.


Chapter Five explores the transition of the information press under the Revolution. The chapter explores how the tremendous experimentation in subject matter within the Old Regime press changed during the early years of the Revolution once censorship restrictions and market monopolies were lifted. It provides an overview of the content of such letters, which depicted both the promise of Revolutionary transformation, and the trepidation of instability that a new social order brought with it. Such an evaluation sheds light on the role of the press in shaping public discourse about Revolutionary change.

The study of letters to the editor allows the historian to probe a number of questions about the nature and texture of the Enlightenment and Revolution as it was actually experienced by French men and women. It illuminates the way information was shared, received, and contested by a substantial reading public undergoing significant social upheaval, and it renders a clearer understanding of the complex links between Enlightenment culture and the French Revolution.
A PROSOPOGRAPHY OF THE READING PUBLIC

The prosopography of men and women who contributed letters to affiches and journaux in eighteenth-century France is limited by the lack of source material corroborating their identity. To some extent, we cannot know for sure who wrote these letters. There are few extant records of eighteenth century newspaper publications, and the records that do exist have been thoroughly investigated. Laurence Coudart and Jean-Paul Bertaud have studied such records extensively.\(^1\)

The extant newspaper records were preserved because the papers were shut down for their conservative political leanings during the French Revolution. For more moderate newspapers that avoided government shutdown, little records remain. The individual letters received by the editors, and the editors’ decision-making process of what to print, what to reject, and what to modify remain obscured. My own extensive investigation of Parisian and provincial libraries and archives unearthed less than five manuscript letters written to the editors of pre-Revolutionary affiches and journaux.\(^2\)

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\(^2\) There is one letter, for instance in the published private correspondence of Felix Faulcon, the Poitevin who became a deputy during the French Revolution. See G. Debois, *Correspondence de Félix Faulcon* (Poitiers: Société des Archives Historiques du Poitou, 1953), 133. In la Bibliothèque Municipale de Troyes, I located two manuscript letters, one of which was an ad written on October 22, 1784 by a Mr. Michelin publicizing his *Annales*, which was curried to the editor by Courtalon. This letter was not published in the *Affiches de Troyes*. The other letter was a transcription of a letter from the *Affiches Orleanais* from Monday, September 25, 1780, which had first appeared in the *Affiches de Champagne* on August 9, 1780. I was unable to locate this letter in the *Affiches de Troyes* or in the *Affiches Orleanais*. 

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In his analysis of a few extant manuscript letters from the *Tatler* and *Spectator*—a rare find of material related to eighteenth-century English newspapers—Richmond Pugh Bond located and analyzed a number of contributions that were written to the newspapers’ editors, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. Bond found that such letters did not illuminate the editorial decision-making process, nor did they unearth the identity of many more letter writers. In fact, he was able to verify the identity of only one writer amongst the letters he investigated.\(^3\) Furthermore, by comparing the manuscript letters to the published newspapers, he found that the extant letters were precisely those that never made it into print. Eighteenth-century editorial practice was for the editor to send the missives to the printing shop, and the printer would then recycle the letter, sell the paper for scrap, or throw away the materials once the paper was printed. Such practices help explain the rarity of manuscript letters to the editor for this period. Furthermore, Bond’s findings speak to the limited answers such documents provide to questions of editorial practice or to verifying writers’ identities, even when it is possible to locate such materials. Indeed, an investigation of the manuscript letters available for the newspapers in this dissertation yielded much the same result—none of them were printed by the newspapers to which they were sent.

Since little external evidence remains in the form of manuscript letters, or in the form of explanation of practices by the editors (either in diaries or personal correspondence), the historian must instead rely upon the internal evidence of the letters, themselves. Given the diversity of topics covered in the letters, the stylistic variation in prose, and the number of letters published by known authors, I am confident that the published letters to the editor represented a wide cross-section of the French reading public. While it is possible that some of the letters were

\(^3\) Richmond Pugh Bond, *New letters to the Tatler and Spectator* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1959), 22.
written by the editors or by a paid correspondent, the diversity of writing styles and content makes it extremely unlikely that this was the case for most of the letters. Bond’s analysis of extant manuscript letters from the Tatler and Spectator led him to the conclusion that letters generally fit into three categories: some were indeed authored by the editors; some were composites of a number of letters that the editors received on the same topic, which they compiled into one piece; and some letters were written by individuals who wrote, “as any group of diverse men and women write--poorly, stiffly, easily, or well.”

Based on the internal evidence of the French letters to the editor, one might assume much the same practices were employed in the affiches and journaux under study in this dissertation. The writing styles of the letters varied in their prose as well as their content. And the variety of themes and rhetorical strategies in the letters are suggestive of many different authors.

Finally, occasional indications from the editors of what was cut from a letter, or why a letter was selected for publication, generally underscore that editors tried to print contributions from their readers that required little preparation for printing, much like editors do today. For example, the post-script to a letter in the Journal de Normandie sheds some light into the editorial process in Rouen: “Nous avons reçu plusieurs lettres qui contiennent à-peu-près la

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5 This is not to indicate that exactly one third of the letters fit neatly into each of the categories of written by editors, written by subscribers, or composites. This is instead a rough metric for the forms that letters took. Quantifying the proportions of letters in each category is unfruitful, since it would be based on little more than the historian’s own guesswork rather than on any concrete evidence in the sources themselves.
même idée; nous avons donné la préférence à celle-ci, parce qu'elle présente un plan facile & détaillé.”

SIGNED LETTERS

Despite the limitations inherent in rendering a prosopography of the letter writers, a collective biographical sketch nevertheless provides a sense of the imagined audience to which editors pitched their papers and to which fellow readers responded. The sources under examination consist of letters to the editor published in newspapers throughout France between 1770 and 1788. A sample of letters from Paris’ first daily, le Journal de Paris, and letters that were published in the provincial affiches in Orléans, Toulouse, Metz, Grenoble, Rouen, Troyes, Caen, Dijon, Beauvais, Angers, and Poitiers comprise the approximately 3,500 contributions under examination. Approximately half of all published letters were signed, and nearly 60% of the signed letters indicated a profession after their signature. In all, 1,310 of 3,500 letters indicate the profession of the writer. References made by the writers themselves allow the historian to reconstruct a partial prosopography of the periodical reading public in the last decades of the Old Regime. Whether the authorship of all of the letters was authentic or fictional is impossible to know with certainty, since the manuscript letters no longer survive. Nevertheless, the variation in form and content of the letters is suggestive of a wide range of contributors. Furthermore, whether the letters can be demonstrably proven to have been written by particular individuals does not remove the significance of the self-representations in such letters, which shed light on the way editors envisioned the target audience of their papers, and which shaped the way a reader imagined the community of his or her fellow subscribers.

7 Journal de Rouen, April 3, 1788, 141-142.
In order to systematically account for the professions of letter writers some 26 professions or social positions were identified and coded in the database (See Figure 1.1).
By far, the most frequent contributors identified themselves as doctors, government officials, clergymen, corresponding secretaries for regional Académies, members of the legal profession, or as members of the nobility (See Figure 1.2).
Amongst the letters that were signed with some indication of the author’s profession, over 70% of the individuals identified themselves in one of these groups. That educated men in the liberal professions, the Church, and the government were active and vocal participants in the social and cultural life of their local communities is perhaps not surprising. Their letters often reflected the professional and social investment they felt for their communities. For instance, letters from clergymen, which comprised the largest social group with 212 contributions, identified their day-to-day preoccupations: *curés* wrote frequently about the needs of the least fortunate in their local parish, while simple “*abbés*” were more apt to take part in a debate related to their work as tutors.
or academicians. Doctors, surgeons, and dentists contributed 194 letters. Nearly every letter written by a doctor concerned itself with medicine: an update on a local epidemic, a report on a new technique witnessed at a hospital, or a recipe for an effective remedy. Lawyers contributed 178 letters on a range of topics, from the law, to current events, to belles lettres. And letters by Academicians numbered 127—their contributions underscored the public interest in the arts and sciences in a short, manageable way that tended to incite responses from fellow readers.\footnote{In his work on essay writing competitions held by regional Académies Jeremy Caradonna has identified a similar range of topics to those covered amongst the letters written by corresponding secretaries of Académies. Caradonna, *The Enlightenment in Practice: Academic Prize Contests and Intellectual Culture in France, 1670-1794*.}

Members of the nobility contributed 103 letters to the Parisian and provincial presses; many of the letters were composed at the estates where they were a seigneur, and then were mailed to the local affiches for publication. The 93 contributions from government officials came from various offices. The most frequent contributors were members of the military or procureurs. However, mayors also wrote in to provide information about local current events and how they sought to improve the town; and intendants wrote in with suggestions about how to improve agricultural practices in rural areas that they oversaw. Tax collectors and censors also contributed occasional letters.

While members of the nobility, the clergy, the government, the legal profession, the medical profession, and Academicians figured prominently in the pages of journaux and affiches in the 1770s and 1780s, they were by no means the only contributors. Indeed, letters to the editor were penned by a range of educated professionals: educators, students, architects, engineers, editors, and of course, writers. Writers and editors already familiar with the publishing process contributed approximately 50 letters. Preoccupied with their personal reputation in many cases, they used the venue of the newspaper to air their grievances with
another writer for either stealing their work, or for falsely attributing their name to a publication they had not authored. Students and teachers also wrote some 29 letters on subjects relevant to their own areas of expertise. The 25 letters written by performers and artists tended to publicize the spectacle in which they would soon appear. Engineers and architects also contributed to the preoccupation with public works in the newspapers in some 38 letters.

What made the forum of letters so unique amongst Enlightenment venues for debate and discussion, though, were the contributions by men and women lower in the social strata: farmers, artisans, domestics, *maîtres de pension*, and even a laborer contributed letters. In most cases, the letters written by such individuals related to their work. For instance, the *manœuvre* referenced a previous letter in the *Affiches de Troyes* that he believed had maligned his involvement with canal and bridge projects in the town. Amongst the seventeen artisans writing letters were clockmakers, locksmiths, a tanner, and a butcher. Some of the letters were also written collectively by workers’ associations, like “Les Gardes & Adjoint en Charge du Corps des Marchands-Fabricants d’Etosses & de Gazes, Tissutiers, Rubanniers Boutonniers, Passementiers, & Brodeurs” or the “Caisse philanthropique en faveur des Ouvriers de la Fabrique de Lyons.” Individuals working in service industry jobs wrote 13 letters, five of which were penned by maîtres de pension. Workers were not all from urban centers, however. Farmers of various statuses—*receveurs de la terre, laboureurs, fermiers, cultivateurs, a vigneron,* and a *carme*—wrote 21 letters on agricultural topics. While such voices from among the urban and rural working classes were certainly the minority in the pages of affiches and journaux in the late eighteenth century, their presence nevertheless underscores the diversity of contributors

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9 The laborer described himself as a *manœuvre*.
10 *Les Affiches de Troyes*. January 1, 1784, 5-7. A true “manœuvre” would be unlikely to have functional literacy at this time.
11 *Les Affiches du Dauphiné*, November 23, 1787, 131; *le Journal de Paris*, March 9, 1788, 305.
brought together in the forum of letters to the editor. Indeed, historians of the *Journal de Paris* in particular have emphasized that the Parisian daily was popular reading material for the marginalized, especially domestic workers.¹²

Women from various social strata contributed their thoughts to their local newspapers, extending their well-practiced epistolary activities into a public forum.¹³ I identified some 62 letters that were written by women who referenced their gender, either in the content of their letter, or by their signature. Who these women were is difficult to determine, because most did not reveal their identity. However, some of them did indicate a social status—la Comtesse de Bussy signed her letter, as did the Abbése de Beaurepaire.¹⁴ Two women indicated their social status by their husband’s profession: the spouse of “M. Duval, Maitre en Chirurgie de Paris” and “la Femme d’un Chasseur.”¹⁵ There were also women who worked: a *couturière*, an *aubergiste*, and a *libraire* each identified themselves by their profession.¹⁶ Roxana Fialcofschi’s analysis of the *Journal de Paris* has emphasized that women were not only frequent contributors to the paper, but also that the letters they penned touched on an array of subjects:

Tout en invoquant leur “curiosité” naturelle, les lectrices ne se limitent pas aux seules modes et aux coiffures, mais s’intéressent aussi à la musique, aux dernières découvertes scientifiques et participent avec conviction aux actions philanthropiques déclenchées par le *Journal*. Certaines d’entre elles touchent au problème du mariage ou du divorce, de la jalousie entre femmes-auteurs et plaident pour l’égalité de la femme. Apparemment, la lecture du *Journal* et le temps passé à la toilette ne semblent nullement s’exclure. Un lecteur convient

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¹³ Dena Goodman has written extensively on the education and letter writing practices of women in the eighteenth century. Goodman, *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*.
¹⁴ *Les Affiches du Dauphiné*, June 1, 1787, 18; *Le Journal de Paris*. July 7, 1777, 3-4.
plaisamment que la “variété piquante” de la feuille de Paris est appropriée aux lectrices, puisque “une femme, en la lisant à sa toilette, peut orner son esprit pendant qu’on pare sa tête, c’est-à-dire, sans qu’elle ait à vous reprocher la perte de son temps.”

These women fall outside of the group Carla Hesse has studied in The Other Enlightenment, since her measure of women writers includes only those who published books or pamphlets under a verifiable name. The women who penned letters to newspapers were occasionally verifiable authors with other publications (like Sarah Goudar, an Englishwoman living at the Palais-Royal in the 1780s), but most women asked the newspaper editors to conceal their identity. In most cases, they preferred to identify themselves as a man’s wife, or as a child’s mother, as a means to substantiate their letters’ value to the reading public, and as a vehicle to maintain their sense of bourgeois modesty and virtue. Nevertheless, the diverse group of women who contributed their thoughts on a range of topics made the forum of letters to the editor a unique space in which women could cultivate their minds and share their opinions.

Contributions from abroad were less representative of the general body of contributors; they tended to be individuals who were wealthier and were well known for other publications. Much of this correspondence was written in the form of travel narratives, which were a prominent genre in the public imagination of the eighteenth century. In general, they sought to contribute to a growing body of knowledge about the world. Doctors worked collectively, comparing notes in the hope of treating their patients more effectively. International travelers sought to understand France’s relationship to the broader world. As one writer put it, “le caractère, l’esprit & l’état politique des peuples…peuvent avoir de grands effets politiques.”

17 Fialcofsch, "Le “Journal de Paris” et les arts visuels, 1777-1788," 86.
general, such writers shared a praxis of comparison, and their careful notation of difference reflected the early anthropological literature available in popular novels, philosophical texts, and current news reports.\textsuperscript{20}

Taken altogether, the letters published in the Parisian and provincial presses during the last two decades of the Old Regime were penned by men and women from all three estates, but from the Third Estate most of all (see Figure 1.3).

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Le Journal de Paris}, 13 May, 1787, 574.
As Figure 1.3 demonstrates, members of the clergy and the nobility comprised more than half of the letters until 1776. After that point, letters by men and women of the third estate became the more dominant voices in the papers. To some extent, this shift may be owing to the introduction of *le Journal de Paris* in 1777, which printed far more letters than any provincial affiches. The increased space devoted to letters allowed for a greater volume of published correspondence—space that in some provincial affiches had previously been almost entirely devoted to letters from...
notables and clergy in the généralité. While nobles and clergymen continued to submit their opinions to the paper, it is clear that over time, the first and second estate became minority voices in the press. By the 1780s, letters penned by members of the third estate comprised the majority of published correspondence, and in doing so shaped the agenda of the newspapers to fit their concerns.

LITERACY AND THE QUESTION OF REPRESENTATIVENESS

While the letter writers represented a broad cross-section of literate French society, the limitations of literacy in the eighteenth century were significant.\(^{21}\) Certainly, the French reading public was not representative of French society in general: taken as a national average based on signatures on marriage acts, literacy rates by the 1780s measured 37%. Such rates do not necessarily indicate the functional literacy of the population, since the measure was based on one’s ability to sign a document, not an individual’s ability to comprehend it.\(^{22}\) Measurement techniques for the early modern period remain imprecise: researchers have estimated rates of literacy based on the capacity of adults to sign their names on their marriage acts, the possession of books listed in their wills, or the presence of schools in the vicinity. Each technique runs into limitations. For example, critics have pointed out that the ability to sign one’s name was no guarantee that one was functionally literate. Likewise, measures based on the possession of books may be a more direct marker of economic and social status than of literacy, as there is no

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\(^{22}\) Furet and Ozouf, Lire et écrire : l'alphabetisation des Français de Calvin à Jules Ferry; Daniel Roche, France in the Enlightenment, Harvard historical studies (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Douthwaite, The Frankenstein of 1790 and Other Lost Chapters from Revolutionary France.
way of knowing if an individual had read all the books in his or her possession. Nevertheless, such estimates render a rough sketch of literacy rates that varied dramatically by region, gender, and social status.

In general, a major divide in literacy followed the line from Saint-Malo to Geneva, which delineated a much more literate north (where male signing ability reached as high as 80% by the 1780s) from the less populous, more rural southwest (where male literacy remained at 29%). Women were able to read at approximately half the rate of men throughout France.\textsuperscript{23} Within urban centers, literacy rates far surpassed those of rural communities. Julia Douthwaite has documented that between 1774-1792 in Paris, 66% of men and 62% of women could read. In Toulouse and Marseille, over half the adult population was literate, and in Lyon, literacy rates were over 60%.\textsuperscript{24} Emmet Kennedy has noted that it was by no means only bourgeois men and women who were reading. By the French Revolution, in the working class Faubourg Saint-Marcel, literacy was at 68%. Amongst the working classes of Paris, literacy was especially high for domestic servants, at an estimated 85%.\textsuperscript{25} Such estimates are likely high, and a reflection of signature measures, not of functional literacy. Nevertheless, such proportions are suggestive that rates of literacy were higher in urban centers than in more rural regions.

Thus, literacy studies for the period indicate that the French reading public in the eighteenth century was not representative of the French public more broadly. Nevertheless, literacy rates had increased during the last decades of the Old Regime. The increased publication rates of printed material were a testament to the increased public interest (and market) in books,\textsuperscript{23-25}

\textsuperscript{23} Hesse, \textit{The Other Enlightenment : How French Women Became Modern}.
\textsuperscript{24} Douthwaite, \textit{The Frankenstein of 1790 and Other Lost Chapters from Revolutionary France}, 8.
pamphlets and newspapers. Indeed, many of the affiches published in provincial towns began publication in the 1770s and continued to publish regularly for the next 20 years; such longevity suggests that they found an audience. Of the twenty-six affiches that published throughout the 1770s and 1780s, fifteen were above the Saint-Malo-Geneva line. Their location in urban centers, and their concentration in the north and west of the kingdom underscore the correlation between the information press and literacy rates.

While the reading public was not representative of French society in general, the letters to the editor printed in provincial affiches and Parisian journaux represented literate France quite faithfully. Letter writers, like the newspapers’ audience, tended to be urban elites in government, business, or the liberal professions; occasional letters by artisans, farmers, and women also appeared in the newspapers. Indeed, the demographic variety of the letters to the editor published in North American newspapers at the same time was rather similar to the French case. For example, those who penned letters to the Federal Gazette in Philadelphia about yellow fever were a mix of elites, city officials, and ordinary people, "passing along rumors, offering folk cures and remedies, speculating on the religious meanings of the disease, sharing their fears and their sorrows," in much the same manner as their French contemporaries. The range of people who wrote letters and the diversity of written responses to a local disaster were much the same as those published in France after a local fire, epidemic, or harsh winter.

Social science studies of letters to the editor in 21st-century America offer conclusions about editorial practices and public involvement in letter writing based on survey data of editors and readers. The consensus amongst researchers in this field is that letters to the editor columns

26 Martin, La presse régionale : des affiches aux grands quotidiens.
are not representative of the general public, or even of the general readership of newspapers. Indeed, letter writers today tend to be older, wealthier, and more highly educated than the general public.\textsuperscript{28} Explanations for these demographic features vary. For example: letters to the editor forums have grown to attract contributors with such demographic characteristics; or those with higher education are more comfortable taking part in a public debate; or older individuals write more letters in general.\textsuperscript{29} Whatever the reasoning, the general demographic features of those contributing letters to the editor appear rather similar to those of the eighteenth century, where the typical contributor tended to possess more education, leisure, and resources than the average person.

PSEUDONYMS

While many writers chose to identify themselves by name, nearly 10\% of letters published between 1770 and 1778 appeared under pseudonyms.\textsuperscript{30} The limitations on newspaper content specified in each newspaper’s privilège and regulated by the royal censors shaped not only the topics discussed in the letters to the editor, but also the willingness of contributors to reveal their identities. Pseudonyms offered letter writers a means of sharing opinions that may not have been popular without requiring the writer to bear the social, professional, or legal consequences.\textsuperscript{31}


\textsuperscript{30} Names that were obviously false were classified as pen names. The pseudonyms included the following categories: classical allusions, literary references, archetypal figures, and professional descriptors.

\textsuperscript{31} In his study of pseudonyms in Anglophone newspapers, Eran Shalev makes the case that “the main reason for writing anonymously and pseudonymously in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe was the harsh censorship imposed by absolute regimes. In the political culture of the \textit{ancien régime} any set of ideas that competed with those of the government was considered heretical. Political debate unfolded more easily under mediation that would not expose writers to the severity of the censor.” Eran Shalev, "Ancient Masks, American Fathers: Classical
Evaluated over the period between 1770 and 1788, the letters with pseudonyms that appeared in newspapers in Paris and the provinces remained relatively low (See Figure 1.4). Coding the approximately 4,000 letters published in *le Journal de Paris* between 1777-1791 proved time consuming. A sample of approximately 1,800 letters from 1777-1788, and 540 letters published from 1789-1791 was selected in order to give a sense of the general content of the newspaper. Revisions of this dissertation into a book manuscript will allow time for the coding of the remaining letters.

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Figure 1.4: Number of Pseudonymous Letters by Year in all Newspapers Sampled, 1770-1787

The blue line indicates all pseudonymous letters published in provincial affiches, while the red line indicates all those published by *le Journal de Paris*. The number of pseudonymous letters in the provinces grew incrementally throughout the period, with the largest jump in the number of letters occurring between 1781 and 1784.\(^{32}\) This rather jagged line in the early 1770s may speak to a few characteristics of the regional press at this time: first, the regional papers tended to publish letters by elites, or at least by individuals who were known to the editors. Frequent calls

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\(^{32}\) This jump in the total number of pseudonymous letters might be an artifact of more papers being included in my study by this time period, as some of the publications did not begin to print until the late 1770s or early 1780s.

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in the papers in those years asking that letters be signed by those submitting a letter “a l’auteur” (or “au rédacteur”) emphasized the editorial desire to ensure accuracy in their publication, and requiring a signed letter was a means for editors to assure themselves and their readers that the content of their paper was sound. The red line begins in 1777, when the Parisian daily first began publication. Since this dissertation includes an uneven, partial sample of the total letters published in *le Journal de Paris*, it is likely that the steep dips are an artifact of the incomplete sample. Some years are included in their entirety (the high points of the spikes), while other years include a month, a four-month period, or half of the year. Compared to the affiches, the number of writers who used pen names was much higher in *le Journal de Paris*. Given the partial nature of the data for the Parisian paper, it is difficult to draw final conclusions from it. Nevertheless, by disaggregating the letters published in Paris from those published in the provinces, it is possible to track the gradual uptick in the number of letters published in the provinces during this period. When taken together with the other letters published by known authors, anonymously, or by initials, letters signed with a pen name remained a rather small, and fairly consistent minority trend.

Pseudonymous letters were performative in nature, painting a picture of who the writer might be in the mind’s eye of the reader. Such names emphasized the writer’s profession: “un Artiste de l’ancienne Académie de S. Luc;” “le Rédacteur du Journal des Théâtres;” “un Curé des environs de Civrai;” “Cultivateur du Pays;” or simply “un médecin.” By identifying themselves by their profession, the writers presented an archetype, which the reader could then fill in with their own assumptions about the writer’s experience. Such names expressed a level

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33 While the Parisian publication did publish some letters under pen names, they tended to comprise a minority of all letters published throughout the newspaper’s pre-Revolutionary run. The only spike in pseudonymous letters signed was in 1777, when the editors of the *Journal de Paris* were perhaps most eager to accept any contribution that was submitted to their editors.
of expertise on the subject of the letter, as a curé would surely know the needs of his parish, and a cultivateur would understand the health of grain in his region. Such descriptions of contributors not only allowed the reader to imagine the kind of person who possessed an opinion on a given topic; but they also provided a portrait of the kind of audience the newspaper was intended for. By including letters from men in various professions, editors identified the market that they anticipated for their publication. It is likely that some of those who gave only a profession claiming to be a “curé” or a “cultivateur” were fictional, and were submitted simply to underscore the rhetorical aims of the letter.

Some pseudonyms omitted any mention of profession, and instead focused more directly on the writer’s relationship to the topic they discussed. Such names identified whether the writers were experts, like the contribution written collectively by the group, “les Lettrés de Senlis,” or amateur outsiders, like the writer who chose the English pen name, “Tom Reader.” In this way, letters served a rhetorical purpose by identifying writers as elites or everymen, and they set an expectation in the mind of the reader for the kind of argument that would appear in the letter. Likewise, the authors of missives penned by “un Hermite de la Foret de Sennar,” “un Solitaire patriote & agricole de Dauphiné,” “le spectateur,” “le Solitaire Inconnu,” “Le Voyageur Anglois” painted themselves as objective outsiders whose isolation allowed them to provide a clear perspective. Alternatively, some signatures were directly linked to place names, like “un Lexovien,” to convince the reader of the author’s identity as an interested party in the region. A “Lexovien” was a name for a resident of Lisieux, a town in the Basse-Normandie. The letter itself was a request for more content in the form of poetry, word puzzles, and other “belles lettres” pieces. By adopting a pen name, writers established their expertise and proximity to the subject of their letter in order to place demands on the newspaper’s editor or their fellow readers.
The use of a pen name also could serve a rhetorical purpose, not only in protecting the author, but also in informing the reader of the writer’s motivations. By adopting a pseudonym, the author was able to put on a public mask. Roxana Fialcofschi and Eran Shalev’s studies of pseudonyms in the eighteenth-century press highlight the construction of a public persona via one’s pen name. Fialcofschi’s doctoral theèse on le Journal de Paris identified a number of pseudonymous writers who became for the newspaper’s readers a colorful cast of characters, like “le Marin Kergolé,” or “Nigood d’Outremer.” Readers could track the letters printed in the newspaper, much as they would follow characters in a serial novel, citing their favorites, following their contributions, critiquing, and defending them. Fialcofschi argues that such pseudonyms functioned as masks—both obscuring the true identity of the writer and allowing for the creation of a public persona. That is, even if the reader knew the true identity of the writer behind the pen name, the pseudonymous identity seemed to have a life of his or her own, much like a fictional character might. Eran Shalev’s study of pen names in the press of the Early American Republic likewise draws on the imagery of masks in his description of pseudonymity: unlike anonymity, which leaves the reader in a void, deception is inherent to the idea of pseudonymity. A writer is evidently present, but only an assumed identity is encountered. The reader, trying to visualize the one whose words are perceived, is barred by a wall of deceitful pretense, false existence, impersonation.

Letters to the editor in the French press functioned in much the same manner. For example, one writer to the Toulousain paper both literally and figuratively masked himself to lengthen his distance from the statements made in his letter. He took on the identity of “Scaramouche,” both

34 Fialcofschi, "Le “Journal de Paris” et les arts visuels, 1777-1788," 83-84; Shalev, "Ancient Masks, American Fathers: Classical Pseudonyms during the American Revolution and Early Republic."
36 Ibid.
as his pseudonym and as his costume to a masked Bal Public in Toulouse. His letter recounted
his encounter at the Carneval festival with a beautiful woman who minimized the importance of
Lent in the present age and argued instead that she studied “la morale dans le Cœur des honnêtes
gens, & je ris & dans tant que je peux, parce que la gaieté est le baume de la vie.” The entire
letter used a series of masks—the strange woman, the masked man, the pseudonymous author—
to distance the writer from his opinions on morality and religion.  

In his investigation of classical pen names, Shalev asserts that by taking on the mask of a
pseudonym, the writer was able to invent a public persona, and to create a series of connections
in their readers’ minds to a classical political discourse. While those who penned letter to the
press under the Old Regime were not as fond of Latin pen names—“Pro Patria” and “Symbulus”
seem to be the rare instances of Latin pseudonyms in the French press—Shalev’s emphasis on
choosing a pen name that made a larger political situation more legible for the reader certainly
applied in the French context as well. Pseudonyms did a lot of the rhetorical work for the writer,
allowing the reader to fill in the gaps left out by a short letter.

A final group of pseudonymous letters was signed by women who wanted to keep their
identity obscured, proffering to the reader an archetype of womanhood instead of an individual
identity. Some signed with only an indication of their gender: “une Dame,” “mad*** abonnée,”
or “Madame***.” Others gave a sense of their social status, like “la Marquise de…” A third

38 Les Affiches de Toulouse, March 6, 1782, 39–40.
39 Shalev argues that, "In shaping their republic, writers chose ancient masks enabling them to
convey their arguments through a more authentic and intimate performance, which reflected the
ideological anxieties and aggressions that poured out of those tracts." Shalev, "Ancient Masks,
American Fathers: Classical Pseudonyms during the American Revolution and Early Republic,"
157-58. He concludes that, "Throughout the years of the creation of the Republic the discourse
via the ancients helped Americans reduce their experiences into manageable and recognized
terms and forms. The semiotic space of antiquity turned the interpretation of reality into
something less intimidating and puzzling." See "Ancient Masks, American Fathers: Classical
Pseudonyms during the American Revolution and Early Republic," 169.
group of women writers signed by justifying their contribution as a mother of young *citoyens*, like “la Mère du Jeune-Homme.” Conventions of propriety for bourgeois women were more constrained than those of the prominent voices of poissardes and salonnières that Hesse has identified. Choosing to remain anonymous, or to emphasize one’s virtuous status as wife or mother, made sense, especially within the bourgeois social context within which most of these women wrote.

Pseudonyms served not only as masks for their authors, but also as rhetorical tools deployed to conjure an image of the author in the mind of the reader. Selection of an appropriate pen name served to make the author more distant or more proximate, more objective or more invested in the letter he or she wrote. Especially in the cases of women, pen names served as a shorthand for a set of social expectations that the author could then uphold or subvert.

INITIALED AND ANONYMOUS LETTERS

Anonymous letters to the editor composed approximately 31% of all the letters published in Paris and in the provinces between 1770 and 1788. Such letters were unsigned, or were signed simply, “un de vos abonnés.” In the early 1770s, anonymous contributions to the provincial affiches were rare (See Figure 1.5).

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40 Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern*.
Figure 1.5: Number of Anonymous Letters by Year in All Newspapers Sampled, 1770-1787

The blue line depicts the number of anonymous letters published in provincial affiches. Especially in the early 1770s, the provincial affiches tended to print letters from elites in the general vicinity of the town where the newspaper appeared, so this trend is what one would expect for the provincial press. The red line indicates the number of letters published in *le Journal de Paris* that were anonymous. Unlike the affiches, which indicated much more of a general trend upward, the Parisian paper oscillated up and down within a range that was higher than the affiches. The editorial staff seemed to accept unsigned letters much more than their provincial counterparts. In 1781, we see slight growth in the adoption of anonymity, and after
this point anonymous letters penned to the provincial papers grew. Such a change may well indicate the loosening of restrictions in the provincial press that had favored elites in the 1770s. However, because the number of all letters—signed, unsigned, initialed, and pseudonymous—grew throughout this period, the growth in the number of anonymous letters had very little impact in the general proportion of letters published in this manner (See Figure 1.6).

Figure 1.6: Number of Letters by Signature Type in All Newspapers Sampled, 1770-1787

![Graph showing the number of letters by signature type from 1770 to 1787](image)

Figure 1.5 is most instructive, as a tool for comparison of the four signature types. The sharp spikes likely reflect the uneven sample of *le Journal de Paris*. Nevertheless, the way that the four lines tend to generally mirror each other, albeit on separate scales, allow for a comparison of the various methods writers used to sign their letters. Clearly, signed letters came to be the most common signature type by 1783, and they remained dominant until the Revolution.
Pseudonymous and initialed letters remained by far the least common ways of signing a letter, comprising the same proportion of the total letters studied. Anonymous letters fell in-between the other signature styles, though by the 1780s, this approach failed to keep pace with the number of signed letters.

Today, most newspapers reject anonymous letters automatically. About 85% of newspapers require the name of the letter writer to be published along with the letter.\textsuperscript{42} The larger the newspaper’s circulation size, the more selective they tend to be with their letters, and the less apt they are to accommodate a writer who wishes to remain anonymous.\textsuperscript{43} Surveys of the American reading public in the 2000s show that approximately one in three people who do not write letters to the editor report that they would submit letters if their names were withheld from the published letter.\textsuperscript{44}

Eighteenth-century editors were much more willing than editors in 21\textsuperscript{st}-century America to accommodate writers who wished to remain anonymous. Indeed, the majority of letters published in the English newspapers, the Tatler and Spectator were anonymous, and their identities remain unknown to historians.\textsuperscript{45} Some researchers have tried to identify the early modern writers of such anonymous letters by comparing internal evidence within the letters, themselves, with other documents of known authorship. Dorothy Medlin’s study of a few letters to the editor in the Journal de Paris follow this approach: she compared known works published by André Morellet, private correspondence between Morellet and Benjamin Franklin, and five manuscript letters housed in a Genevan archive and the Lyon bibliothèque municipale, to letters published anonymously in the Journal de Paris. Medlin’s study ultimately identified a series of

\textsuperscript{43} Reader, "Age, Wealth, Education Predict Letters to the Editor," 58.
\textsuperscript{44} "Age, Wealth, Education Predict Letters to the Editor," 64.
\textsuperscript{45} Bond, New letters to the Tatler and Spectator, 9.
anonymous letters that she believed Morellet authored.\textsuperscript{46} While it is possible in rare cases to find anonymous letters that can be matched to a well-known writer, the lack of extant manuscript letters and the sheer number of letters published anonymously makes a large-scale investigation of this sort impossible. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that both known intellectuals (as evidenced by Medlin’s study) and marginalized individuals (like those sited by Reader and Bond) adopted anonymity.

While we may never know the identity of the anonymous contributors to French journaux and affiches, perhaps knowing who they really were is not as interesting as understanding the public personae such authors sought to present instead. Most anonymous letters appeared in the paper simply without any signature. The lack of explanations for anonymity by the writers themselves or by the editors who published the letters seem to indicate that neither party felt an obligation to explain why they did not sign their name to their letters. For example, in some ten years of publication in \textit{Les Affiches de Dijon}, which published anonymous letters throughout the decade, only three anonymous letters included some kind of explanation for the letters that they published. When authors did explain why they wished their letter to remain private, the rationale was usually that they preferred not to risk their reputation by attaching their name to a letter. They insinuated that the editor of the \textit{Affiches de Dijon} knew their identity, but that they asked for his discretion in concealing their name. One such writer asked the editors for anonymity out of fear that his letter’s frankness would upset his mother.\textsuperscript{47} Another contributor who recommended a medical remedy hedged in an effort to protect his professional reputation: he

\begin{flushright}
\textit{Je ne signerai pas ma lettre, parce que mes inquiétudes pourraient me rendre ridicule, & ma franchise déplaire à ma mère. J’espère que vous ne blâmerez pas ma dissimulation.”} \textit{Les Affiches de Dijon, ou Journal de Bourgogne}, June 15, 1779, 102-103.
\end{flushright}


\textsuperscript{47} “Je ne signerai pas ma lettre, parce que mes inquiétudes pourraient me rendre ridicule, & ma franchise déplaire à ma mère. J’espère que vous ne blâmerez pas ma dissimulation.” \textit{Les Affiches de Dijon, ou Journal de Bourgogne}, June 15, 1779, 102-103.
concluded his letter by assuring the editor that while he was sure that the remedy would work, he would rather that the paper conceal his name.48 Such requests emphasized the potential costs writers could experience if their letters’ contents were not well received. By concealing their identity, they sought to protect their public reputations.

In contrast, some letters asked for anonymity out of a sense of public virtue. One unsigned letter recounted an act of bienfaisance that the writer had witnessed. Having observed a generous man pay the rent for a family about to be thrown out of their home, the writer believed that the public had to know about what had transpired, but he did not want to face the reproach of the generous man by revealing the philanthropist’s identity.49 Traits de bienfaisance were a popular subject of letters to the editor, and this letter followed a familiar structure; indeed, it was the very anonymity of such acts of goodwill that made them charitable, as do-gooders were not supposed to be interested in receiving public recognition for their contributions.

A third group of anonymous letters included a post-script from the editors, which provided information about the professional background or the public stature of the anonymous contributor. The editor of the Affiches du Dauphiné noted that one letter was written by a professor of law “connu par ses lumières & par son amour patriotique.”50 While most of the editors were men, widows published the provincial affiches in Grenoble and in Arras.51 In one particularly specific editorial note in the Affiches du Dauphiné, she specified not only the

48 “Ce moyen, comme vous le voyez, Monsieur, est très-simple, & j’ose en garantir l’efficacité. Si vous croyez pouvoir le publier, j’en serai charmé. Mais comme cet objet est de bien peu de consequence, faites-moi le plaisir de dissimuler mon nom.” Les Affiches de Dijon, September 13, 1785, 183.
49 “Je vous prie, Monsieur, d’insérer cette Lettre dans votre prochaine Feuille, sans cependant faire mention de ma signature, qui pourroit m’attirer quelques reproches de cette homme honête.” Les Affiches de Dijon, February 6, 1787, 54-55.
50 Les Affiches du Dauphiné, February 27, 1778, 174-175.
author’s profession, but also the courier who had delivered the letter: “cet article est d'un Physicien de Grenoble. Il a été remis au Directeur de ces Feuilles par un Magistrat de cette ville, très-zélé pour le progrès des sciences, à qui l'Auteur en avait fait hommage.”52 In another reference, she included the writer’s profession as a way of distancing the newspaper from the content of the letter: “un Amateur très connu en cette Ville, qui nous a prié de la publier sans le nommer. Nous croyons devoir avertir, à cette occasion, qu'en rapportant les différentes lettres qui nous sont adressées, nous ne prétendons adopter aucun système, ni prendre aucun parti.”53 Over time, her claims about the writers grew much more general in form, attesting only to their status within the community, as she did in the following two letters: “cet article nous a été adressée par une personne de considération de cette ville,” and “Cet article est d'une personne très-éclairée & très considérée.”54 What these references tend to suggest is that even if the letters did appear anonymously in the published paper, the contributor’s identity was usually known to the editors. They tended to be known members of the community whose reputation and ideas the editor respected.

Finally, a fourth group of writers chose to identify themselves by their initials, sometimes including their town of residence and their profession. Initialed letters were not adopted until 1773, when they first appeared very occasionally in the Affiches de trois évêchés et lorraine. Such letters comprised 10% of all letters published throughout the period. This strategy of initialing one’s letter was more popular in Paris than it was in provincial publications (See Figure 1.7).

52 Les Affiches du Dauphiné, January 30, 1784, 162-165.
54 Les Affiches du Dauphiné, December 7, 1787, 138; Ibid., April 25, 1788, 236.
Figure 1.7: Number of Initialed Letters by Year in All Newspapers Sampled, 1770-1787

By 1786, such letters comprised nearly 20% of all letters published. Indeed, letters initialed by their authors remained the least popular strategy adopted by writers throughout the period under study (See Figure 1.6).

Initialed letters shielded the writer’s identity to the mass public, but they might have given those in the same town, profession, or social circle sufficient information to identify the
writer. In this way, such writers could remain anonymous to the mass public reading the 
newspaper, while at the same time revealing themselves to a smaller sub-group of fellow readers. 
This tactic lent writers a coded means of communicating to friends, colleagues, and 
correspondents in the know about their identity. Furthermore, printing a public letter was an 
efficient means of getting the word out—for individuals looking to garner support for a local 
project, or to publicize a current event, submitting one’s thoughts to a paper saved the time and 
resources of writing many letters to various friends and acquaintances.

Most often, signing one’s letter with initials allowed the writer to veil their identity, even 
as they revealed their profession. For example, perhaps in an effort to avoid outright conflict 
with health practitioners whom he vehemently denounced in his letter, a doctor writing in to the 
Affiches de l’Orleanois signed his letter only with his initials.55 In one instance, the editors of 
the newspaper included a small note distancing themselves from the unknown author: “Nous ne 
nous permettons aucune réflexion sur la lettre qu'on va lire; il nous suffit d'observer que nous 
n'avons pas l'honneur d'être connus de l'Artiste qui nous l'écrit, & que nous n'avons jamais eu 
avec lui la moindre relation, même indirecte.”56 In instances like this one, signing with one’s 
initials and one’s profession gave the reading public an indication of who the writer might be 
without conveying certainty about the individual’s identity. In other cases, it is very likely that 
individuals did not want to sign letters that consisted of plagiarized or fictional content drawn 
directly or in emulation from epistolary novels, operas, or letter-writing manuals. Such 

55 “Malheureusement, cette lettre sera peut-être inconnue à ceux pour qui je la destine; mais elle 
sera lue par des personnes éclairées, qui pourront empêcher les progress du Charlatanisme. Je 
n’étois utile qu’à quelques individus, puissant mes réflexions le devenir à mes Concitoyens!” 
Les Affiches de l’Orléanais, July 17, 1777, 121. 
56 Les Affiches des les trois évêchés et Lorraine, July 1, 1779, 383-387.
references allowed both the letter writer and the editorial staff to distance themselves from the content of a letter that could become controversial.

PENNIMG A PUBLIC LETTER

A prosopography of those who penned letters to the editor raises the question of why eighteenth century men and women would write a letter with the intention of publishing it. Writing letters was a popular—even ubiquitous—activity in eighteenth century France. The epistolary form was the basis for popular novels. It was the subject of instructional manuals written for a range of social positions, especially for women and for youth. Letters were essential to forwarding the plot of several performances at the Opéra Comique.⁵⁷ The acts of reading a missive or of writing one were the subject of numerous paintings. Dena Goodman’s work has underscored the importance of letter writing and the consumer industry that accompanied it: the desk, papers, ink, pens which situated the letter writer in relation to not only the recipient of the letter, but to the market and to le monde.⁵⁸

When writers sat down to pen a letter—whether a private note to a friend or family member, or a public one intended for the pages of their local newspaper—they drew upon a familiar set of writing conventions. Studies of eighteenth-century epistolarity have documented the norms embedded in letters at the time. In particular, they emphasize how the very form of the letter placed a set of demands on the writer of the letter and on the letter’s recipient. Janet Altman has identified six major “polar dimensions of the letter”: as both a bridge and a barrier to the distance that separates the sender from the recipient; as a tool for conveying the writer’s transparent self, or of presenting a masked self; as a document that moves from the private

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⁵⁷ Amongst these opéras-comiques that used letters to facilitate the progression of the plot were Le Deserteur (1769), Richard Coeur de Lion (1784) and Sargines ou l’Elève de l’amour (1788).
⁵⁸ Goodman, Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters, 161-246.
sphere to the public one once it is shared; as a format dependent on the reciprocity of the recipient writing back; as part of an ongoing chain of correspondence that could end at any point—both open-ended and finite; and finally as a fragmentary source that demands the reader fill in the narrative gaps left between the letters.59 While Altman’s analysis is based on published volumes of missive letters between two fictional writers, her observations are nevertheless helpful for understanding letters to the editor. Indeed, eighteenth-century readers were well-acquainted with letters as a literary form, and they modeled their own correspondence after the structural and stylistic conventions that they observed in print.

The letters to the editor under study here fit two of Altman’s categories especially closely. First, they convey the writer’s transparent, or masked, self. Second, they demand a reciprocity from the reader—one which placed the weight on the reader to critique, to write back, and to act. The writers of such letters made these demands implicitly and explicitly in the ways they framed their observations, and their opening or concluding remarks were often concerned with submitting information to a public record so that their fellow readers might judge it and respond. Such contributions set the tone for their letter from the outset by priming the reader to form his or her own opinion about the argument, like an excerpt from a letter that first appeared in the Gazette d’Agriculture that was reprinted in the Affiches du Poitou on February 16, 1775, which began with the directive to the editor: “vous jugez, Monsieur.”60 Other letters ended by framing their letter as a set of facts which the reader must judge for themselves. A particularly rich example from the Revolutionary period was written by an angry father who believed an officer enlisted his son without properly informing the young man or his family. The letter ended in the

59 Janet Gurkin Altman, Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 186.
60 Les Affiches du Poitou, February 16, 1775, 26.
following manner, "dans cette position je laisse au Public à peser dans la balance de l'équité la conduite du sieur Belin & la mienne." Asking his fellow readers to weigh the evidence, the writer trusted that the public would provide some form of justice.

Given that so much of the theoretical work on epistolarity pays attention to private correspondence, how public letters fit within this body of literature merits consideration. Was there something fundamentally different about writing a public letter like a letter to the editor? The Encyclopedistes certainly made a distinction. The lettre missive was a personal, intimate letter meant to be kept private; on the other hand, the lettre familière was a private letter intended for public viewing—a form employed by philosophes to shape ideas in the public arena. Letters to the editor were certainly written to be made public, but they did not always fit so clearly into a larger program as did the lettres familières. The motives of the writers penning letters to a local newspaper were much more varied. In fact, they expressed a range of concerns—they sought to share information; to solicit support for their cause; to advertise a product to an inquisitive public with means; to ask a question of a public that might have more expert information; or to counter the position of a previous letter that was published. They might also seek to convince other readers that they were in the right in a dispute, or that their commodity was worth buying.

In addition to enabling a wide cross-section of literate society to participate in public debate, writing a letter to the editor was also a personal project: the asserting of the self. To pen a letter to the editor, the writers defined themselves as private individuals, and in doing so they had to articulate their own subjectivity, their relationship to and space within public and private

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61 Les Affiches de Dijon, July 12, 1791, 146.
spheres. Carla Hesse has emphasized that it is this self-reflexivity, mediated through writing—and for which literacy was essential—which made one modern.\(^{63}\) Dena Goodman’s study of women writing during the same period has demonstrated that it was through the process of composing letters that eighteenth-century women came to understand their own subjectivity, that they articulated themselves both as private persons and as women—and these self-definitions were made (and are always made) vis-à-vis a public sphere.\(^{64}\) For men and women of the eighteenth century, letter writing was an important means of articulating the self and the public sphere’s relationship to it. The two were mutually constitutive. The simultaneously public and private act of writing a letter to the local newspaper reflected the intertextual nature of this media form, itself: combining the popular pastime of epistolary exchange with the rather new, local information press.

Finally, writing a letter to the editor got ambitious men and women into print who lacked the economic means or the professional network to get a book or pamphlet published. The costs of writing a letter to the editor were low; in the format of a public letter, those eager to share their ideas with the public (or to make a name for themselves in the marketplace) found a comparatively easy path to publication.

In order to test whether writing a letter was indeed the first foray into print for such individuals, a sample test was conducted of 449 letters published in four newspapers from cities throughout France: Poitiers, Metz, Dijon, and Paris.\(^{65}\) Three years were selected (1774, 1779, and 1785) in order to measure change over time. For the newspapers published in Poitiers and

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\(^{63}\) Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern*, xii.


\(^{65}\) *le Journal de Paris, les affiches de Poitou, les affiches de Lorraine et des trois eveches*, and *les affiches de Dijon*. 
Metz, all the letters published during the three years under study were consulted. In Dijon, the
*Affiches de Dijon* was not published during 1774. For the *Journal de Paris*, the sample excludes
1774, as the newspaper was not founded until 1777. First, I coded the signatures of each letter as
anonymous, pseudonymous, initialed, or signed. Next, all of the letters that were signed with the
author’s name were identified. Approximately half of the letters in the sample were published
with the signature of their writer, though the proportion of signed letters increased over time.

Table 1.1: The Percentage of Signed Letters Published in a Sample of Four French Cities,
1774, 1779, 1785

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>1774 Total Letters</th>
<th>Signed Letters</th>
<th>%Letters Signed</th>
<th>1779 Total Letters</th>
<th>Signed Letters</th>
<th>%Letters Signed</th>
<th>1785 Total Letters</th>
<th>Signed Letters</th>
<th>%Letters Signed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poitiers</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metz</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dijon</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>54.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>54.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean %</td>
<td></td>
<td>45.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>52.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Then, a keyword search in the Bibliothèque nationale de France’s (BNF) online catalogue for
each individual who had signed his or her letter to the editor was conducted. It is likely that most
books published by these authors would be present in the BNF depository and catalogue. I was
particularly interested in identifying whether each letter writer was a published author at the time
when he or she penned a letter to their local affiches or journal. While the results varied by
newspaper, in general, the letters signed by writers who were already published constituted
nearly a third of all published letters. Certainly, the prestige of such writers varied—some had
published only one pamphlet related to their profession. For instance, doctors occasionally
published a pamphlet related to best practices in their field, like how to prevent blood loss in new
mothers or how to treat rabies. Others were rather prolific writers: playwrights like Honoré-
Antoine Richaud-Martelly, Carlo Goldoni, and Joseph Marie Piccini; scientists like astronomer Jérôme Lalande, engineer Jean-Claude Pingeron, and chemist (and later deputy to the Legislative Assembly) Louis-Bernard Guyton de Morveau; moralists like Joseph-Aignan Sigaud de la Fond and l’Abbé Méry de la Canorgue; and a pornographer, Mérande de St-Just, were amongst those who wrote pamphlets and books in addition to letters “aux auteurs du journal.”

Table 1.2: The Percentage of Signed Letters by Previously Published Writers, 1774, 1779, 1785 (based on a search of the Bibliothèque national de France online catalog)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Signed</th>
<th>% by Previously Published Writers</th>
<th>Total Signed</th>
<th>% by Previously Published Writers</th>
<th>Total Signed</th>
<th>% by Previously Published Writers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poitiers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metz</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dijon</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean %:</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td></td>
<td>28.96%</td>
<td></td>
<td>37.78%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The investigation into a sample of four newspapers confirms that the majority of letter writers were previously unpublished. The data show that this group of individuals who wrote to their local newspaper was rather diverse—bringing together specialists and amateurs into a shared forum on a range of cultural and social questions.

READER-WRITERS AND THE FORMATION OF A PUBLIC SPHERE

The ways that writers articulated their public personae in their letters (or chose to omit aspects of that identity) revealed a set of cultural values: first, that reading was a shared, communal activity; and second, that as readers and contributors, such writers constituted a public capable of judging and acting upon what they read. Both the form of the newspaper and the content of the letters worked together in order to communicate these values.

How the men and women who penned letters to the editor understood their contribution to a newspaper was shaped by a set of reading practices that took place in shared spaces, where
the written word was often transmitted orally, and where conversation about the information presented was common. There was a range of spaces dedicated to reading under the Ancien Régime, which varied according to geographic location and social status.

Urban French readers could pay to read the international gazettes in gazetiers, or various other newspapers in cabinets de lecture. Such spaces were privately owned reading rooms, which allowed members to read a range of publications on the premises—and sometimes to rent items to take home—for a set monthly fee. Still others joined sociétés d’amateurs, which were associations of literary enthusiasts who shared a subscription amongst the members. Finally, chambres de lecture were cooperatives of sorts, where individuals gathered to read and debate the papers that they purchased collectively. Many booksellers ran reading rooms where one could come and read from a range of publications. Occasional ads in the newspapers written by the editors publicized local reading rooms, listing the publications available and the cost of dues for access to the collections. For those living in more urban locations, reading rooms provided a more economical alternative to a private subscription. From these lists of periodicals published along with the reading room ads, it is possible to identify what publications were available in major French towns, and to situate the letters within the larger milieu of which they were a part. Furthermore, a range of other spaces, including cafés, clubs, and gambling halls made newspapers available to their customers for free. Such spaces indicated not only that the total readership of a given newspaper was higher than the total circulation, but also that reading collectively was a commonplace.

Similar to Parisian practices, in provincial centers, reading brought with it not only information, but also sociability. One letter to the Journal de Normandie written by a bourgeois

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66 Chartier, Lectures et lecteurs dans la France d’Ancien Régime.
67 Goodman, Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters, 19-62.
woman petitioned for support to set up a reading room in her town. In her social circle, the men worked, and the women had little to do, especially in the summer months. She asserted that access to information, and the discussion of such information amongst the bourgeois men and women of the town was essential to the life of the community. Citing the popularity of summer gatherings, she explained that learning about the news was not just useful, but popular. She elaborated that “les hommes & les femmes s’assemblent donc. On converse, on joue, on danse quelquefois, surtout on parle nouvelles: non pas nouvelles d’Etat; mais nouvelles de la Ville & de Faubourgs, & autres lieux circonvoisins. Rien au monde n’est si délicieux que ces sortes de nouvelles. […] C’est dans les petites Villes qu’il faut chercher la fine fleur de la critique.”

She believed that opening a reading room in town would serve as an extension of this fascination with news and would provide a space for the cultivation of critique. The acquisitiveness for information this woman and her social group expressed was well reflected in the tremendous growth in the publication of books, pamphlets, and newspapers throughout the eighteenth century. The preference for news from the surrounding region suggested that the most interesting information was that which concerned the places and people that were known to the reader. Indeed, for this reader, news was not necessarily a timely review of world events, but rather an update on the activity in the region that allowed for the development of gossip, wit evaluation. Her contribution indicated that the fascination with critique was as much an aesthetic and class marker of status and refinement as it was a reflection of interest in the intellectual growth of the town. Furthermore, such statements were likely necessary to pass the censor.

69 Furet and Ozouf, Lire et écrire : l'alphabetisation des Français de Calvin à Jules Ferry.
In the countryside, reading was likewise a collective pastime. Books and newspapers written specifically for peasant populations were often read aloud by those who could read to those who could not. A series of letters published by various country noblemen in *la Feuille Villageoise* recounted the way they gathered together with their peasants in the evening to read the paper together. After the French Revolution had begun, one writer referred to the experience of reading the paper aloud as a “catéchisme civique,” through which the minds and the souls of the farmers who were gathered were enlightened.\(^70\)

Furthermore, reading was not just an activity that was literally undertaken collectively, but also figuratively, as Benedict Anderson has described. Anderson has argued that reading the daily press changed the way people thought about information, themselves, and their communities, because the newspaper explained how individual readers fit within a larger community, market, and social network. First, reading the newspaper transported readers into a world both abstract and familiar by calling upon them to imagine the events about which they read. To use Anderson’s own example, when the newspaper reader read a story about a dead vagrant along the side of the road, he did not, himself, come across the body, nor did he know the vagrant, but he knew the road—he had passed that way before, and he could imagine the “representative body, [though] not the personal life.”\(^71\) Such accounts gave readers a sense of immediacy—in both time and space—to events that transpired in places that they knew.

Second, the paper juxtaposed information of various types—to use Anderson’s examples, a local homicide, a coup overseas, an archeological discovery, a political speech—into an

\(^70\) *La Feuille Villageoise* 1, no. 4 (1790), 50. For a thorough study on *la Feuille Villageoise*, see Melvin A. Edelstein, *La Feuille villageoise : communication et modernisation dans les régions rurales pendant la Révolution*, Mémoires et documents (France. Commission d'histoire économique et sociale de la Révolution française), 34. (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale 1977).

arbitrary landscape. The events were not causally linked, but their juxtaposition next to one another on the front page connected the subject matter in the mind of the reader: they fit together because of “calendrical coincidence”—they happened at the same time.\textsuperscript{72} We see this same juxtaposition at work in the eighteenth century French press. The well-known philosophe and later deputy to the Legislative Assembly, Nicolas-Louis François de Neufchâteau summed up the \textit{Journal de Paris’} conveyance of information as follows:

\begin{quote}
J'aime à me représenter votre Journal comme l'image fidèle de nos conversations rapides, où l'on effleure tout, sans disserter sur rien; où les failles frivoles croisent les discussions profondes; où les nouvelles du quartier sont coupées par des réflexions philosophiques; où des transition imperceptibles lient les matières les plus disparate; où les détails d'une coiffure à la mode succèdent à ceux de l'apparition d'une comète; où l'on parcourt en un quart-heure le cercle des connaissances & des sottises humaines; où l'imagination fait, en un clin d'œil, le tour du monde, & […] le tour de l'homme; où l'on juge tour à tour la grand dispute des Colonies Anglaises avec leur Métropole & la querelle de la Musique Italienne avec la Musique Françoise; enfin où l'on passe & repasse en un moment, "des livres aux Bijoux, des Compas aux Pompons, &c."\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

François de Neufchâteau highlighted this dramatic juxtaposition that characterized Paris’ first daily press. The topics featured in the paper were myriad, ranging from rather erudite scientific and philosophical discussions to trivial conversations about fashion. The global and local were situated on the same page. The newspaper by its very juxtaposition of such information “created an imagined community among a specific assemblage of fellow readers,” to whom these tidbits of information—global and local, trivial and erudite—belonged.\textsuperscript{74} This same logic was at work in François de Neufchâteau’s letter as he navigated the information marketplace of the \textit{Journal de Paris’} pages.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[72] Ibid.
\item[73] \textit{Le Journal de Paris}, February 23, 1778, 213-16.
\item[74] Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism}, 64.
\end{footnotes}
Furthermore, the daily nature of this particular newspaper gave it a special linkage to both the market and to daily practice. Anderson has underscored the increased scale of production and circulation of newspapers in the eighteenth century: print material designed as ephemera that lost its relevance quickly: these “one-day best-sellers” were designed to be picked up and consumed on one day in particular at certain hours.\(^{75}\) For Anderson, and I would argue for eighteenth-century readers of the French domestic press, the daily ritual of reading the paper was significant: it happened habitually, and it was practiced on a mass scale, “replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence [the reader] is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion.”\(^ {76}\) In the case of eighteenth century France, the practice was likely shared by hundreds of individuals, not thousands, but the act was similar. This attention to newspaper reading as ritualized, daily practice appeared in the content of a letter “a l’Auteur” written by Sarah Goudar, who summed up the quotidian space that the newspaper took up in the lives of its readers:


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vous saurez aussi que je suis Anglaise, & que je déjeune chaque jour à la manière de mon Pays: ainsi mon maître Jacques, ou ma fille de chambre, m'apporte, tous les matins, sur une table placée à côté d'un de mes balcons, une bouilloire, une théière, une tasse à thé, un sucrer, un pain d'un sol, six liards de beurre, & le Journal de Paris, que je lis régulièrement pour savoir comment va le monde lettré.\(^ {77}\)
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Paris’ daily, \emph{le Journal de Paris} was part of her daily diet. Her day was shaped around this habit of eating lunch, reading, and reflecting on the news of the day. In this way, she reflected Anderson’s discussion of the importance the newspaper played in ordering and sharing time. Reading the newspaper constituted a collective, daily routine that bound people together over the shared activity and the shared content, even though they did not know each other.

\(^{75}\) \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism}, 35.
\(^{76}\) \textit{Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism}, 36.
\(^{77}\) \textit{Le Journal de Paris}, March 10, 1782, 274.
In fact, for Anderson it is rather important that they did not know each other. The reader saw the reiteration of his individual action writ large in the city—people reading the paper at neighbor’s homes, in cafés, in reading rooms, etc., such that the newspaper reader was “continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life,” generating for each reader a “confidence of community in anonymity.”

Anderson has ascribed the nation to this community. In the letters I have studied, writers occasionally framed their contributions out of love for or for the benefit of la patrie, but the majority of authors instead articulated their ideas as for the good of le bien public. I am skeptical that the shared practice of reading in eighteenth century France was constitutive of a nation in the minds of most readers, but nevertheless the shared practice of reading certainly served to tie together readers in conversation, in critique, and into a social body that imagined itself within a larger, shared dialogue amongst readers of the same paper.

One of the markers of this community of readers engaged in the shared process of reading the daily journal was not particular to the readers of this one metropolitan press. Rather, readers were aware that most major cities had such papers. As early as 1778, François de Neufchâteau compared Paris’ daily to the situation of the press abroad: the English had sixty or eighty papiers publics, he observed, and they had carried the same journalistic tradition across the sea to Philadelphia and Boston. As for continental Europe, Madrid had a daily paper, and so did Rome. Even Stockholm had one. In fact, the entire purpose of his letter was to assert that he and his contemporaries were living in a world of daily presses, and he argued that the Journal de Paris needed to put forward a certain image of Paris. For him, this goal was critical, because foreigners who lived in Paris read the paper, and because it would benefit the public to learn

78 Anderson, Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, 36.
about the world and about Paris. He tasked himself with directing Paris’ public image—to the *Journal de Paris*’ readers and to the world.

READERS AND PUBLIC OPINIONS

In the case of the eighteenth-century French press, the very layout of the newspaper facilitated the imagining of community in the minds of its readers by soliciting content. Paul Benhamou’s investigation into periodicals of this period emphasizes the influence that the structure of the newspapers had upon the way its readers understood the newspapers’ content. That is to say, the papers created a sense of engagement by weaving letters to the editor and belles lettres contributions into the content of the paper on a range of topics, thus presenting to the reader “the appearance of dialogue,” from the editor to the readers, and amongst readers themselves. By oscillating between private concerns and public issues, such contributions blurred for the reader the boundaries between a private missive and a public debate. Benhamou argues that this was intentional on the part of the newspaper editors, who used the familiar genre of personal correspondence in order to create for their readers a sense of “public ‘intimacy’” which gave readers the sense that they were involved in a periodical that was in dialogue with them.

By casting the newspaper as a responsive, inviting space, and by publishing responses to letters that had been submitted, these newspapers presented themselves as interactive spaces,

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where the reader could shape the content (at least to some extent) of the paper. That readers imagined themselves part of a shared community of readers and writers may well have been a product not only of the shared ritual of reading, and the shared consumption of information, but also a result of the newspaper itself telling them that it was so. Perhaps such solicitations for readers’ contributions explained one of the reasons why those who penned letters to the editor came from such varied backgrounds.

Eighteenth-century readers not only imagined themselves as members of a community in dialogue with one another, but also as arbiters of the information that they consumed. Indeed, the forum of letters to the editor became for its readers an open tribunal. Clare Brant observes that, in the English case, letter writers appealed to the readership of a paper to weigh in or pass judgment on a decision when they were frustrated by the courts or other regulatory bodies. Writers called upon the “the tribunal of the public”—composed of their fellow readers in order to judge for themselves whether the injury suffered by the writer was just, and by appealing to the public as the arbiter. 82 In the French context, efforts to set the record straight appeared regularly—such letters ranged from simple corrections of the address of one’s residence to more complicated defenses of rumors, intellectual property, or political positions. Furthermore, a range of letters unconcerned with recuperating one’s own public image appealed to the public as the tribunal over aesthetic tastes, scientific verity, or moral probity. While their goals did not

82 “Letter-writing salvaged character in ways tailored to the cultural context in which it had been damaged. Unable to get the right people to listen, letter-writers turned to the tribunal of the public as a symbolic alternative, one through which they were able to shake off imputations of wrongdoing and write as innocents, or point the finger at those whose guilty misdeeds were cloaked by power. Letter-writing not only kept the tribunal of the public active, but it made the public realize it had a tribunal.” Clare Brant, "The Tribunal of the Public: Eighteenth-Century Letters and the Politics of Vindication," in Gender and politics in the age of letter writing, 1750-2000, ed. Caroline Bland and Máire Cross (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 24.
always mirror the ones Brant examines, appeals to the “tribunal of the public” written into these letters acted as a catalyst to convince the readership of their need to judge and contribute their own perspectives. As we have seen, more and more letters were published over the two decades under investigation (see Figure 1.5), and requests in the letters inviting a critical response often spurred fellow readers to write in their own perspectives. The concerns that people brought to this tribunal were diverse: provisions for social welfare, implementation of new technologies, suggestions for agricultural stability, personal testimonies about medical remedies, and improvements of public spaces each figured prominently within their conversations. Amongst this thematic diversity, letters shared a vocabulary of articulating the paper as a space for sharing such information, and situating the readership as the judicial body that evaluated the information before it.

CONCLUSION

The readers who voiced their opinions by sending a letter to their local newspaper constituted a forum for critique, calling upon the editors and the public to judge for themselves the content of their letters. The extent to which such writers shared their identities varied. Strikingly, nearly two thirds of all contributors gave an indication of their name and profession. While 28-40% of such contributions were penned by previously published authors, the majority were instead written by amateurs who were otherwise unable to get their ideas into print. Indeed the range of social positions and professional interests—which included not just men of letters but also women and domestics—sets apart the forum of letters to the editor as an especially open, particularly diverse public sphere.

Furthermore, the act of writing a public letter enabled men and women in the eighteenth century to articulate their own subjectivity vis-à-vis a public. Participating in the shared act of
reading, which juxtaposed information in the mind of the reader, fixed the individual in relationship to a larger world and a wider body of fellow readers. The language of their letters further demonstrated that they envisioned themselves not only as fellow readers, but also as arbiters in public debates who were capable of contributing their own opinions for the public to judge.
Chapter 2
Reconstructing an Information Network under the *Ancien Régime*, 1770-1788

INTRODUCTION

The readers of the French information press who penned letters to their local newspaper certainly saw their paper as a repository for useful information, and imagined that they were in dialogue with fellow readers by means of their printed letters. Chapter Two is an investigation of whether newspapers did, indeed, generate a responsive collective environment whereby information could be debated and disbursed. By studying the connections between newspapers, measured through the letters that were reprinted from one newspaper to another, this chapter explores the extent to which the provincial press in the late eighteenth century was embedded within a larger information network. Previous research on the provincial press during the Old Regime has tended to characterize the affiches as local vessels read in isolation from other information sources, and largely shaped by nearby forces, like editors, the local intendant, or the particularities of the regional market. Counter to the perspective of the historiography of the press as a more insular endeavor, this chapter maps out the connections that linked the provincial reader of a paper in Metz, for instance, to letter writers in Paris, Chinon, Lille, and Lyon.¹ Such a visualization of the eighteenth century domestic press suggests that readers of a particular provincial publication did not read one source in isolation, but instead that reading the local affiches drew readers into a larger information network, that circulated news and ideas throughout the kingdom.

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In order to define the scope and nature of this information network, this chapter begins with a macro view of the network and zooms in to a micro view of the wording in the letters. The first of three sections presents a networks analysis of the processes of information transmission from one newspaper to another. This general sketch is then followed by an overview of the topics of letters that were reprinted and a prosopography of those who penned them. The final section looks at the word-for-word content of the reprinted letters, allowing for a clearer understanding of the editor’s role in shaping the content of the paper.

By tracking the growth in information exchange in letters to the editor—by the geographic range, the speed of publication, the frequency of reprinting, and the subject matter of such letters—I argue that the forum of published correspondence exposed French readers to a wide array of information from regional, national, and international sources. Networks analysis serves as an effective way to track the patterns of information transfer during this period.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Networks analysis in historical inquiry has grown out of three related fields: Social Networks Analysis, world history, and the digital humanities. Social Networks Analysis (SNA) in history began to appear in sociological historical analysis in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Drawn largely from sociology, and employing a highly quantitative method, SNA approaches ran counter to the aims of its cultural historians dominant at the time, and thus have received little attention in the historiography from the period. Nevertheless, networks analysis can illuminate the structures through which relationships were formed, ideas were spread, and values were shared in the early modern period. For example, Peter Bearman mapped the system of religious patronage of 16th and 17th century gentry in Norfolk, England in order to explain
religious factionalism amongst families in the civil war that followed. D. White and H. Gilman McCann studied the citation practices of eighteenth-century chemists in order to track the so-called “chemical revolution” when Lavoisier’s paradigm became dominant over Priestley’s. In the past decade, Claire Lemercier has brought social networks analysis techniques to bear on cultural history questions, underscoring its unique capacity for exploring the relationships between individuals, texts, or ideas and helping historians see patterns and measure change in relationships in a systematic, large-scale manner. Indeed, such analysis shares the goal of tracking relationships in order to draw larger conclusions about social and cultural change.

Research in world history has also revitalized interest in networks as a category of historical analysis. Questioning the primacy of the state has led historians to think more self-consciously about the categories of analysis they adopt, and to draw newfound attention to questions of scale. Such questions have led world historians to focus on the sets of relationships that are revealed by altering the level of their analysis. That is, world historical projects can vary, for example, from a large-scale exploration of the world market of cotton in the nineteenth century to a micro-historical investigation of a family’s correspondence, but all such projects

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4 "Formal Network Methods in History: Why and How?"
tend to favor those people, goods, and values that connected individuals to one another.\textsuperscript{5} Thus, networks, circuits, and webs of exchange—of commodities, people, and knowledge—have grown in popularity over the past decade.

Finally, one can draw on research in the computational social sciences and the humanities. Projects like “Mapping the Republic of Letters” at Stanford, “Viral Texts” at Northeastern, “Cultures of Knowledge” at Oxford mobilize large data sets of digital texts in order to explore how networks form and how information passes through them.\textsuperscript{6} Networks, understood as systems of connections within a social group, may adopt a number of different structures, but every network invariably consists of “nodes” and “ties” that connect individuals to one another. The most pertinent type of network for the present inquiry is what researchers have described as “small world” networks. In such a system, a few ties that link otherwise relatively distant nodes in the network cause all nodes to be connected by only a few degrees of separation. For example, an individual letter writer is connected to a large number of other writers through the “tie” of the newspaper. The newspaper cuts through the extended chain of communication that might otherwise exist from one individual to the next if they were to write private letters one to the other, and replaces it with a much more direct general connection, thus increasing the spread of information, and the speed at which it travels. A sociological study of this “small world” model shows that individuals who repeatedly receive information in support of a particular idea or


behavior from a number of different “nodes” are more likely to adopt the idea or behavior in question. In the case of letters to the editor, consistent exposure to new ideas and innovations from a variety of sources might well have facilitated their spread and acceptance by other letter writers and readers.

This is what was happening in the French newspapers of the 1770s and 1780s. Rather than having the ideas of a few intellectuals circulating through these papers, what one finds is that ideas about a range of topics and social concerns became popular. It is often around questions of practical, scientific innovation, or the improvement of social welfare that a conversation amongst letter writers took shape. Instead of returning to the ideas of a few philosophes, the writers of these letters cited one another and other periodicals as their information source. In this way, there was a continued attention among a society of writers to recurring social problems and a shared optimism emerged about the possibility of solving them.

ADMINISTRATIVE & MATERIAL CONSTRAINTS ON INFORMATION

In order to understand the way information moved, and the kind of information that traveled through letters to the editor, one must consider the constraints within which the press operated. Under the Old Regime, a formal administration was designed to regulate the press. Inspectors, censors, and intendants all played a role in censoring the content of publications. First, all printers were required to hold a privilège from the administration; this document granted the publisher a title of possession and permission to publish on a renewable basis, in exchange for the submission of all published content to government censorship. The privilèges

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granted to the domestic affiches and journaux precluded them from any discussion of political news. In principle, the editors were required to submit their copy to a designated censor (who was often the local intendant) before their paper could go to press. A larger, more elaborate administrative network led by a director of censorship maintained final approval of the content, and responded to the appeals filed by printers throughout the kingdom. Some newspapers, like *le Mercure de France* for example, responded to such checks on their autonomy by eschewing more controversial topics, in effect self-censoring their content and typifying what Censer has called a “moderate Enlightenment.”

While the administration’s commitment to censorship remained steadfast under the Old Regime, investigations into the correspondence between censors has suggested that enforcement was rather uneven during the last decades of the Old Regime. In some instances, censors were found to have not been reading the copy they were assigned to police, thus implicitly allowing indiscrete content to slip into print. Alternatively, the director sometimes tacitly responded to the requests of publishers for leniency by directing the censor in charge of the particular paper to show greater forbearance in their evaluation of the content. In short, the system of censorship was extensive, but behind the public persona of the administration, the ostensibly stringent guidelines on the content of the domestic press were rather unevenly enforced.

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9 Guillaume-Chrétien de Lamoignon de Malesherbes was by far the most well-known and prominent of the directors of censorship. His correspondence lends the historian some insight into the practices of royal censors in the second half of the eighteenth century. For further discussion of Malesherbes’ work, see, for example, Censer, *The French Press in the Age of Enlightenment*; Censer, "English Politics in the *Courrier d'Avignon*.


Second, the editors themselves played a key role in framing this information network, both by inviting contributions from readers on particular topics and in choosing which responses to print. The very structure of the papers, which posed questions to readers, invited responses from subscribers, and printed the various observations and debates addressed to the editors conveyed the impression that the newspaper was in dialogue with its readership. For example, in Poitiers, the editors assured their readers they would like to print more letters on the same subject, “Nous nous ferons un plaisir d'insérer dans nos Feuilles toutes Critiques, selon les désirs de M. l'Ab. D., pourvu qu'elles soient dictées par les mêmes sentiments qui paraissent l'animer.” In other instances, the editor left a brief note du rédacteur to assure readers that a response was forthcoming, as the editor of les Affiches de Toulouse did, by responding to a reader’s request: “Le Rédacteur se fera un plaisir de satisfaire son Abonné dans la feuille prochain.” Editors also used letters to make their decision-making process more transparent to their readers, by explaining why the paper had chosen to print or not print a particular piece that had been mailed to them. For instance, the editors of the affiches in Rouen objected to a writer’s tone, while the editors in Caen insinuated that the writer knew the reason why his contribution could not be printed. Such editorial checks no doubt shaped the kinds of letters that the paper received from its subscribers.


12 Benhamou, "Essai d'inventaire des instruments de lecture publique des gazettes."
13 Les Affiches du Poitou, December 26, 1782, 205.
14 Les Affiches de Toulouse, January 22, 1783, 18.
15 The editors of the Affiches in Rouen printed the following explanation for their refusal to print a piece sent to them by a subscriber who was known by the initials “D.L.”: “Nous avons reçu un morceau de prose intéressant, intitulé mes Regrets, & Signé D. L. Abonné, des environs d'Argentan. Nous prions l'Auteur de vouloir bien se rappeler que nous ne devons ni ne pouvons imprimer rien d'anonyme. Quoi qu'il en soit, cette Pièce annonce de l'imagination, de la sensibilité & de la verve. Nous invitons notre Correspondant à orner nos feuilles de ses
Finally, access to information was tied to the rate of circulation of the newspaper, which was delivered to its subscribers by the postal service. The eighteenth century information press relied on subscriptions for its survival. Ensuring that such papers had an audience who wanted to read their publication required editors to get it to their readers quickly and consistently; such circulation was facilitated by the postal service, which delivered both letters and newspapers.  

At the time of the French Revolution, the main postal routes were serviced by coaches that carried mail and newspapers quickly, while the secondary roads served the more remote interior of the country at a slower rate (See Figure 2.1). There were fifteen main roads that emanated from Paris, twelve of which had daily departures (See Figure 2.2); two roads (to Bordeaux and to Nantes) had departures six days a week; and one (to Toulouse) went three times a week. By 1789, the roads connected some 1,320 postal offices throughout France. Estimates for this period suggest that everyone in France could receive information by letter from anywhere in the production, en observant toutefois d’éviter des peintures trop passionnées, qu'il y aurait de l'inconvénient de mettre sous les yeux de la partie la plus intéressante de nos Lecteurs. Il n'en est pas d'un JOURNAL comme d'un LIVRE; & cette réflexion suffira pour faire sentir la justice de notre réclamation,” *Le Journal de Normandie*, April 28, 1787, 146; The editor of the affiches in Caen printed the following note explaining why they would not print a letter sent to them: Nous prévenons le Solitaire Inconnu, que des considération qu’il nous est impossible de rendre publiques, mais qu’il doit pressentir, nous empêchent d’imprimer le morceau qu’il nous a envoyé, & qu’il désirerait voir inséré dans la Feuille du 22 de ce mois. S’il paraît jaloux d’acquitter l’engagement qu’il a bien voulu contracter envers nous, il est invité de nous envoyer une autre Paragraphe que nous nous ferons un devoir de publier pour ce temps,” *Les Affiches de la Basse-Normandie*, April 8, 1787, 3.

17 Guy Arbellot, Bernard Lepetit, Jacques Bertrand, *Routes et Communications*, ed. Serge Bonin and Claude Langlois, vol. 1, Atlas de la Révolution française (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 1987). Figures 1-4 are reproductions of Arbellot et. al’s work. They are used here to illustrate the institutions that shaped the timing and geographic presence of letters to the editor in the information press.

18 Ibid. Two roads (to Bordeaux and to Nantes) had departures six days a week; and one (to Toulouse) went three times a week.

19 Ibid., *Routes et Communications*, 1, 39. That number had nearly doubled since the start of the last century. A third of that growth had occurred in the past decade.
kingdom within a twenty-day window, though the speed of information exchange certainly varied as a function of the writer’s and the recipient’s proximity to major postal routes.²⁰

Figure 2.1: Postal Routes in France, 1792

Source: l'Atlas de la Revolution Française, vol. I.

²⁰ Routes et Communications, 1, 38.
As shown in Figure 2.3, information moved much more quickly in the northeast than in the West and Southwest, because the proximity to Paris and the density of main roads was greater there.
The importance of these major arteries is especially evident from the vantage point of provincial cities (See Figure 2.4). A study of four provincial cities thirty years earlier, Clermont, Lyon, Bordeaux, and Marseille, reveals the variance in information transfer by region. The portion of France shaded white indicated the city and the places within one day by post; the darker the region, the longer the time it took for the post to reach it. Clermont, for instance, was centrally located, but it was not on a main postal road, so the time it took to get information a relatively short distance was substantial. To reach the Aquitaine basin to the west—which was not very far geographically—took about a week, because postal carriers had to retrace their steps to a main road. Marseille was also quite isolated at mid-century. In contrast, Lyon was on a main road, and mail traveled very quickly from the city until it reached the frontier. Lyonnais could receive
mail from Rouen or Toulouse within five days. In general, though, it is estimated that mail from Paris arrived within eight days to the 64 major cities in France.\(^{21}\)

Figure 2.4: Receiving Mail in the Provinces, 1763
Number of Days until Delivery

Source: l’Atlas de la Revolution Française, vol. I

THE PACING OF INFORMATION TRANSFER

By comparison, information exchange in the form of letters to the editor took an average of twenty-three days from the time a letter was written until it was published.\(^{22}\) This mean time lapse of just over three weeks varied according to the newspaper in which the letters appeared. According to a sample of the Journal de Paris, letters to the Parisian daily were printed more

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
\(^{22}\) The figure of 23 days is the mean number of days between composition and publication in the French press. The self-reported date of composition was routinely published along with the letter. The number of days between publication and composition was calculated for all letters containing these two pieces of data in le Journal de Paris and twelve provincial affiches. The mean score thus provides a general metric for the delay between composition and publication in general.
quickly. In 1777, its first year of publication, the mean period between composition and publication was five days; nearly all such letters were written within a five-kilometer radius of Paris. By 1785, when the newspaper was printing more letters from the provinces and from other European cities, the time lapse was eleven days. Such a rapid response time meant that often Parisian readers could respond to an article in the newspaper and see their printed letter within a week’s time, making it a particularly responsive and timely publication amongst the newspapers of the 1770s and 80s.

In the provinces, the time lapse was greater. There were three likely reasons why this was the case: first, unlike the daily print schedule of the Journal de Paris, most provincial affiches appeared once or twice a week; second, they were smaller operations with a more limited staff to handle the influx of correspondence; and third, they tended to receive and print letters from further away than their Parisian counterparts. Indeed, in contrast to the Parisian press that drew 90% of its letters from the capital, only 68% of the letters published in the provinces came from the cities in which the paper was published. During the early 1770s, especially, the time it took to publish a letter to the editor varied from a mean of just over two weeks, to nearly two months (See Table 2.1). Table 2.1 excludes the outliers of the occasional letter that originated outside France. Amongst domestic correspondence to the journaux and affiches, by the 1780s, the mean number of days between when a letter was written and when it was published was about 20 days.

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23 A sample of le Journal de Paris consulted for this chapter consists of all letters in 1777, January-June 1779, 1781, January-June 1785, 1787, and 1788. A sampling technique was used to allow for an investigation of change over time in the content and publishing practices of the paper. Owing to the volume of letters published each year, there was not time to evaluate each letter published in the twelve years of the newspaper’s run.
### Table 2.1: Mean Days to Publication for Thirteen French Newspapers, 1770-1788
(values rounded to nearest day)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mean Number of Days between Composition &amp; Publication (Paris)</th>
<th>Mean Number of Days between Composition &amp; Publication (Provinces)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1770</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1771</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1772</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1773</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1774</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1775</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1776</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1777</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1778</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1779</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1780</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1781</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1782</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1783</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1784</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1785</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1786</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1787</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1788</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the exception of 1786—from 1781 onward, the time from composition to publication stayed between a mean of 19 and 22 days.\(^{24}\) As the sample of *le Journal de Paris* demonstrates, in Paris, the number of days between a letter’s composition and its publication remained much lower than in the provinces.

\(^{24}\) It is very likely that the high value of approximately 33 days in 1786 is owing to a typo. One letter printed in the *affiches* published in Metz on November 9, 1786 says it was written on October 5, 1783. This is the only letter with such a long delay, and the letter doesn’t give any internal evidence that it was written in 1783. Since it is impossible to prove with complete certainty that this was a typo on the part of the newspaper, so it is included nonetheless. If this one letter were excluded, the mean number of days between a letter being written and being published in 1786 would be 23 days.
THE GEOGRAPHY OF LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

While the majority of letters printed in the information press in the 1770s and 1780s originated in France, a small subset of 1% were transnational contributions. The *Journal de Paris* published letters from a number of prominent European cities, including London, Geneva, Potsdam, Berlin, and Saint Petersburg. Others came from the Americas—from Boston, New Orleans, and Saint-Domingue. In general, though, the provincial press published at most a handful of letters from abroad. For instance the affiches in Orléans reproduced a letter from Rome, and the Toulousain paper published just one letter from overseas.

The two papers that were exceptions to this provincial norm were the affiches in Grenoble and in Metz, both of which printed letters from abroad more frequently. For instance, those published in the *Affiches du Dauphiné* originated from London, Brussels, and Basel, giving the paper a somewhat cosmopolitan orientation. The presence of such letters in this provincial paper however was the result of the editor’s habit of reprinting letters. The *Affiches des trois évêchés et Lorraine*, published in Metz printed letters from the surrounding foreign territories including the Holy Roman Empire. In addition to letters from French border towns, like Colmar and Strasbourg, the newspaper published letters from Sarrelouis and Cologne. Such contributions conveyed the liminal space that the city of Metz inhabited and its economic and cultural ties across state boundaries.

If the occasional, transnational contributions discussed above are set aside, the average letter traveled approximately 140 km from the location where it was written to the city in which

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25 The letter from Saint-Domingue that first appeared in *le Journal de Paris* was reprinted by the affiches in Toulouse and Grenoble.
it was published,\(^{26}\) with a mean of 82 km for Paris and 171 km for the provincial papers. If one looks more closely at the individual cities in which such newspapers were published, one finds considerable variation (See Table 2.2).

Table 2.2: Mean Distance from Composition to Publication in Thirteen French Cities, 1770-1788
*rounded to nearest kilometer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City where Newspaper was Published</th>
<th>Mean distance* (km)between Location of Composition and Publication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angers</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arras</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauvais</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caen</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dijon</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grenoble</td>
<td>392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metz</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orléans</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poitiers</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rouen</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toulouse</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troyes</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the provinces, Dijon, Troyes, and Beauvais tended to be the least likely to print letters from distant locations. The papers that printed the letters from the furthest distances, on average, were Grenoble and Toulouse. The reasons for this publication practice likely varied. Grenoble reprinted letters from other newspapers frequently, so a number of these letters originally appeared in some other paper before they appeared in the *Affiches du Dauphiné*.\(^{27}\) In contrast, the *Affiches de Toulouse* was relatively remote from Paris and the other cities publishing affiches, and there were comparatively fewer newspapers in this part of France, so letters from the region

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\(^{26}\) Letters published in the city of publication, itself, were coded with a distance of 1 km. For instance, a letter written in Paris and published in *le Journal de Paris* was counted as 1km.

\(^{27}\) Such letters have been included in this analysis, because the aim of this analysis is to show the regions from which information was published, not just the activity of local readers who wrote in to their town’s newspaper.
found their way to this paper that served a more widespread readership.\textsuperscript{28} Of the approximately forty affiches that were in publication between 1770 and 1788, the \textit{Affiches de Toulouse} was one of five in the southwest, and one of only two papers that published continuously throughout the period.\textsuperscript{29} By comparison, more affiches tended to be published in the east and north of the kingdom. Furthermore, the distance from Toulouse to Paris is over 650km, so the letters from Paris drove up the mean distance. As a result, the circulation of this paper appears to have been larger. The remaining provincial cities were more regionally oriented, drawing contributions from a distance of about 100 to 175 kilometers. In general, the information press in the eighteenth century was dominated by voices from the region in which the newspapers were printed. Aside from reprinting letters from the capital, the subscribers in the surrounding \textit{généralité} were the most avid and frequent contributors to the provincial press.

\textsuperscript{28} In the north and east of France, more towns had their own Affiches. By comparison, in the southwest.
\textsuperscript{29} The other affiches were published in Perpignan, Bordeaux, Montauban, and Périgueux. Consultation of the \textit{Affiches de Bordeaux} revealed that letters to the editor almost never appeared. According to Jean Sgard, there are no extant copies of the \textit{Affiches de Périgueux} (1787-1789); the only copies of the \textit{Affiches de Montauban} (1777-1780) are held in the Archives Departementales Tarn-et-Garonne; and the \textit{Affiches de Roussillon} (1776) is held in the Bibliothèque Municipale in Perpignan. See Sgard and Candaux, \textit{Dictionnaire des journaux, 1600-1789}. The short runs of the papers in this region of one to three years left the affiches in Bordeaux and Toulouse as the most consistent publications between 1770-1788. Of the two newspapers, only \textit{Les Affiches de Toulouse} regularly printed letters from its readers.
REPRINTING LETTERS: VISUALIZING A NETWORK OF EXCHANGE

The letters to the editor that appeared in the journaux and affiches were a mixture of original content written by local readers and reprinted material that previously appeared in other newspapers. In order to track how such information circulated from one newspaper to another, all the letters in the sample that had been picked up from their original publication and reprinted in newspapers elsewhere in France were identified; such letters included a byline of sorts that attributed the letter to the paper from which it had been taken. Approximately 10% (363) of all the published letters in my sample were reprinted from another newspaper. As Table 2.3 shows, the rates of reprinting varied by city. More than half of letters published in the affiches in Grenoble were reprinted. In contrast, reprinted letters consisted of less than 10% of the content of the paper in Beauvais, Poitiers, Rouen, and Troyes.

Table 2.3: The Percentage of Letters that were Reprinted in Provincial Affiches, 1770-1788

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Number of Reprinted Letters</th>
<th>Total Number of Letters Published</th>
<th>% of Letters that were Reprints</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angers</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauvais</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dijon</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grenoble</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metz</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orléans</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poitiers</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rouen</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toulouse</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troyes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Editors tended to reprint material that would be of interest to their readership, so reprinted letters serve as a strong signal of the topics that piqued public interest in the 1770s and 1780s. Furthermore, they reveal the sources from which readers drew in order to formulate their understanding of the world. By tracing the publications from which such letters originated,
historians may better understand the information flows through which popular ideas traveled and
the interaction between provincial papers, the Parisian press, and more specialized publications.

In order to visualize the information flows for the reprinted letters, I have displayed them
as a network plot, where each of the circles (or nodes) is a newspaper, and each of the lines (or
ties) indicates one letter that was reprinted from one paper to another (see Figure 2.5). The
arrow points toward the newspaper that reprinted content from another publication. Each
number corresponds to a particular newspaper, and the colors indicate different categories of
newspapers. A visualization of this reprinting network is particularly useful in this instance,
because it allows for tracking the relationships between particular papers. By situating the
newspapers in a network plot, it becomes clear which papers were most cited in this reprinting
practice, and by which papers. Furthermore, it also provides a visualization of the extent to
which provincial newspapers drew on outside sources.
Figure 2.5: Network Plot of Reprinted Letters to the Editor, 1770-1788

**KEY**
- **Red** (nodes 11-12): Parisian journaux & affiches
- **Grey** (nodes 1-10, 13-19): Provincial journaux & affiches in dissertation
- **Blue** (nodes 20-39): specialized newspapers
- **Green** (nodes 40-69): Affiches from other French towns
- **Yellow** (nodes 80-89): International Newspapers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper Name</th>
<th>Node Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affiches d’Aix</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches d’Angers</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches d’Artois (Arras)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Beauvaisis</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de la Basse-Normandie (Caen)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Bourgogne (Dijon)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches du Dauphiné (Grenoble)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal de Provence (Marseille)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches des eveches et Lorraine (Metz)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de l’Orleanois</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal général de France (Paris)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal de Paris</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Poitou</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Toulouse</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Troyes</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Normandie (Rouen)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gazette d’Agriculture</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gazette de Santé</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gazette de France</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercure de France</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ephemerides du Citoyen</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L’Année Littéraire</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courrier Lyrique</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal de Politique &amp; Littéraire</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal Polytype</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal de Littérature nationale &amp; étrangere</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal Militaire</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal Encyclopédique</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gazette des Tribunaux</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal de la Langue Française</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Picardie (Amiens)</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feuilles d’Auvergne</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Bordeaux</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Bretagne</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Chartres</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Almanach de Compiègne</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal de Franche-Comté</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal Guienne</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feuille de Flandres (Lille)</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de La Rochelle</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Limoges</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal de Lyon</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Mans, (generalité de tours)</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Meaux</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal Montpellier</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Moulins</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal de Nismes</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Paris</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Rousillon</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Senlis</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Sens</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Tours</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal de Verdun</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Touraine</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Champagne (Reims)</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiches de Nantes</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal de Luxembourg</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morning Herald (England)</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal de Genève</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Spectator</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The circles nearest the center of the plot form the center of the information network—that is, they are the most commonly cited newspapers. At the center of the network is node 12, *le Journal de Paris*. Another Parisian newspaper, *le Journal général de France* is also at the center of the network at node 11. These two Parisian papers were cited the most frequently by the most sources. All but one of the newspapers under study reprinted letters from the Parisian presses. At the extreme, *les Affiches de Beauvaisis* (node 4) never cited Parisian papers, and only reprinted two letters—one from a local paper in Compiègne and one from Senlis, two nearby towns. This affiches was the outlier, however, as the rest of the newspapers often reprinted one another’s letters. By zooming in on the network plot, excluding *les Affiches de Beauvaisis*, which was unconnected to the Parisian press or to the other affiches analyzed in the dissertation, one may better view the connections between newspapers (see Figure 2.6).
Figure 2.6 not only underscores the centrality of Paris as a source of information upon which provincial newspapers drew; it also reveals the varying extents to which regional affiches...
reprinted Parisian sources. The density of ties between grey nodes in the center of the plot shows that affiches cited both Parisian papers and other prominent regional papers in their letters. The provincial papers in Grenoble (node 7), Metz (node 9), and Angers (node 2) were the most apt to reprint letters from the Parisian press, as evidence by the dense set of ties from the *Journal de Paris* to these nodes.

Paris publications did not dictate all of the content in the regional press, however. The surrounding rings of green nodes, which signify affiches in French towns not included in this dissertation, reveal that provincial papers drew material from other similar publications nearby. The infrequency of ties from these green nodes to multiple grey nodes underscores the regional interests of many of the newspapers. They drew upon sources that were relevant to the surrounding towns where their subscribers lived. In the case of the *Affiches d’Angers* (node 2), the nearby provincial affiches from which it drew were unique to that newspaper. The salience of regional ties suggests that readers in neighboring towns shared the concerns of readers in Angers, especially on topics like agriculture and current events. For example, one reprinted letter, provided recommendations for fruits in all seasons that were especially well suited to the regional climate.\(^{30}\) Regional connections remained a strong source of information and connection for disseminating useful knowledge. The practical preoccupation of the affiches throughout France made letters that addressed everyday concerns a popular source for reprinted material.

The importance of letters from the region is further underscored by the location of the yellow nodes in the network, which represent newspapers published in England, Switzerland, England, Switzerland,

\(^{30}\) *Les Affiches d’Angers*, September 19, 1774, 148. For reprinted letters concerning current events, see, for example, Ibid., February 20, 1778, 34-35; Ibid., October, 20, 1786, 171; For reprinted letters regarding agriculture, see, for example, Ibid., September 19, 1774, 148; Ibid., August 30, 1787, 156-157.
and Luxembourg. Such letters tended to be entertainment pieces that added variety to the newspaper. One particularly popular letter of this sort picked up in London’s *Morning Herald* was republished by at least four provincial papers.\(^{31}\) The letter concerned the dog of a Mr. James Harvey. The dog dutifully followed Mr. Harvey everywhere. When Mr. Harvey died, the dog followed him to the grave, where he cried and threw himself against the burial site. He could only be persuaded to leave his sentry spot for food. Despite the best efforts of the letter’s author to give the dog a home, affection, and food, the dog would only tolerate his attentions for short periods of time before begging to be released from the man’s home, hurling himself against the door if necessary. The writer emphasized the dog’s faithfulness in sentimental terms, and he suggested the dog might serve as an example to forgetful men who disregard the kindnesses of their friends who were separated from them by death. This sentimental letter was exceptionally popular.\(^{32}\) The contribution serves as a sound reminder of the popularity of such literature at this time. Newspaper editors wanted their publications to sell, and sentimental stories apparently helped promote readership.

The cases of the affiches published in Angers, Metz, Grenoble allow for a further understanding of how the editorial and publishing practices may have been shaped by the location of the town in which they were situated. Angers was a quiet town of about 34,000 inhabitants, removed from the pace of life one might find in a commercial or administrative

\(^{31}\) The *Morning Herald* was a London-based newspaper that began publication in 1780. The Reverend Sir Henry Bate Dudley was the editor. In addition to editing the newspaper, he was a minister, magistrate and playwright. See, “Obituary: Sir Henry Bate Dudley, Bart.” *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, pp. 273-276, Vol. 135, 1824.

center.\textsuperscript{33} It was supported by the Church and its monasteries and abbeys surrounding the town, and by legal professionals, as many lawyers came to Angers to study.\textsuperscript{34} This newspaper generated original content to, but the letters under study in this chapter are those that were republished from other sources. According to Figure 2.6 the thickness of the tie between the \textit{Affiches d’Angers} (node 2) and \textit{Le Journal de Paris} (node 12), indicates that the \textit{Affiches d’Angers} frequently reprinted letters from the Parisian daily (see Figure 2.6).\textsuperscript{35} The newspaper drew information from others of the affiches under study in this dissertation, especially those in Poitiers (node 13), Orléans (node 10), and Toulouse (node 14). The \textit{Affiches d’Angers} reprinted letters from other newspapers in Bordeaux (node 43), Nîmes (node 57), Mans (node 53), and Nantes (node 66), and from one more specialized paper based in Paris—\textit{le Courrier Lyrique} (node 27). In general, the sources from which the editors drew were either taken from the surrounding regions of France with a few days’ post, or from Paris.

In Metz, Albert Brondex began publishing a local newspaper in 1773. By 1776, Joseph Antoine took over the publication of the \textit{Affiches des trois évêchés et Lorraine} from Brondex, and Antoine continued to print the paper until, at age 70 in 1784, he passed on the publication to Claude Lamort de Nancy. Jean-François Blouet assumed the direction of the paper in 1786.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{33} John McManners, \textit{French Ecclesiastical Society under the Ancien Régime; a study of Angers in the Eighteenth Century} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1961), 3.
\textsuperscript{34} A notary named Deville founded the town’s first affiches in 1773, and he was replaced by Pierre Deville-Billault the following year. In 1781, the bookseller Charles-Pierre Mame took over the paper and continued to direct it during the Revolution. Sgard and Candaux, \textit{Dictionnaire des journaux, 1600-1789}.
\textsuperscript{35} Please note that Figure 8 is a zoomed in version of Figure 7. Zooming in allows us to more clearly see the variation in the density of ties between newspapers.
\textsuperscript{36} Sgard and Candaux, \textit{Dictionnaire des journaux, 1600-1789}.
Metz was comparable in population to Angers, with approximately 35,000 residents. It had been incorporated into France in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, and became the administrative capital of les trois évêchés. This borderland administrative center maintained an active intellectual community, in particular through its Académie. Amongst the most famous contributors to the various concours sponsored by the Académie were two famous future Revolutionaries. Maximilien Robespierre’s essay on capital punishment in 1784 and the Abbé Grégoire’s essay for religious tolerance in 1787 won the Académie’s prize earned them prestige, and gave them a chance to try out their ideas. The newspaper in Metz (node 9) was unique, because it drew not only from the Parisian papers (nodes 11 & 12), and other affiches, like the ones in Angers (node 2) and Poitiers (node 13), but it also reprinted information from a range of other publications, including regional affiches in Rousillon, Reims, Touraine, and Nantes (nodes 59, 65, 64 & 66), more specialized papers like les Ephemerides du Citoyen and le Journal de la Langue Française (nodes 25 & 34), and the international publication, The Spectator (node 84). Indeed, the Affiches de trois évêchés et Lorraine was distinct in its farther geographic reach, which diverged from other papers in its practice of only reprinting letters from publications in the surrounding region. Metz’s role as an administrative and intellectual center strengthened its importance for the wider region. Furthermore, the literary and philosophical interests of the editors of the paper may well

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37 The earliest demographic data for Metz that I have been able to find indicates a population of 36,878 in 1793. See Des villages de Cassini aux communes d’ajourd’hui, “Metz”: http://cassini.ehess.fr/cassini/fr/html/fiche.php?select_resultat=22347
39 Les Ephemerides du Citoyen (1765-1772, 1774-1776), was a Parisian newspaper that wrote on moralistic and patriotic topics. Sgard and Candaux, Dictionnaire des journaux, 1600-1789.
40 Le Journal de la Langue Française (1784-1795), published on grammar and the art of writing. It was published in Lyon from 1784-1788. Ibid.
have shaped the paper’s preference for reprinting letters on similar topics from throughout the kingdom.\textsuperscript{41}

Finally, Grenoble was unique for its tendency to reprint so much of its content. The location of the city may well have shaped this editorial preference. Grenoble was somewhat smaller than Angers and Metz, with a population of 20,000 inhabitants.\textsuperscript{42} The direction of the newspaper there was somewhat unique: the widow Justine Giroud ran the paper after her husband André Giroud’s death in 1774, and she continued to act as editor of the publication until 1792\textsuperscript{43}. The \textit{Affiches de Dauphiné} (node 7) frequently reprinted letters, and such republished pieces came from a variety of locations. Its close proximity to the center is a reflection of the density of ties with \textit{le Journal de Paris} (12) and \textit{le Journal général de France} (11); that is, most of the content of the letters to the editor published in Grenoble originated in Paris. Other common sources included \textit{le Journal de politique et de littérature}\textsuperscript{44} (node 28), \textit{les Affiches de Picardie} in Amiens (node 41), and \textit{le Journal de Genève} (83). It is possible that overall literacy rates explained the rate of reprints that \textit{Les Affiches du Dauphiné} published. By comparison Lorraine, where \textit{Les Affiches des trois Évêchés et Lorraine} was published, was highly literate; Dauphiné was not. Without as large of a base of literate subscribers in the immediate vicinity of Grenoble, perhaps Giroud had to turn to other publications in order to find letters for her paper.

\textsuperscript{41} Albert Brondex, a writer and printer of limited means, published the \textit{Affiches} from 1773 until 1781, when he was imprisoned for his debts. He turned the paper’s publication over to Jean François Blouet, a bourgeois lawyer from Metz. Brondex and Blouet both showed a preference for literary and philosophical subjects. Sgard, \textit{Dictionnaire des journalistes, 1600-1789}.

\textsuperscript{42} The earliest demographic data for Grenoble that I have been able to find indicates a population of 20,019 in 1793. See \textit{Des villages de Cassini aux communes d’aujourd’hui}, “Grenoble”: http://cassini.ehess.fr/cassini/fr/html/fiche.php?select_resultat=16147

\textsuperscript{43} Sgard and Candaux, \textit{Dictionnaire des journaux, 1600-1789}.

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Le Journal de Politique et Litterature} (1774-1778) was a clandestine journal printed in Paris, although it listed its publication location as Brussels. It published political news and articles on arts and letters. Ibid.
These three cases were suggestive of the general audience that the editor of the affiches in each town imagined himself or herself to have. Those towns situated in larger généralités that were more urban and had a denser population were a good predictor of the amount of letters an affiches might receive and from how far such letters might travel. Grenoble, for instance, was in a small, rather rural, and relatively less populated généralité, so it likely needed to draw from other publications farther afield in order to fill its pages. In contrast, Metz was in a généralité with several other larger towns, and it was connected geographically and economically to Lorraine and Alsace and other provinces in France and Germany that were urbanized.

Finally, Figure 2.9 reveals the specialized journals that most frequently had their content reprinted by regional papers. Pictured in blue, a number of these papers with specialized content on topics like the arts, sciences, agriculture, or the legal profession, tended to appear less frequently, contributing one or two letters. Amongst these journals, two were especially popular: *le Mercure de France* (node 24), which focused on arts and letters, and *la Gazette de Santé* (node 22), which published on science and health. Both the *Mercure* and the *Gazette de Santé*, were, themselves collections of letters to the editor. Their location in the network reveals the overlap that existed in the content between more specialized journals and the local information press. Indeed, not only did people have access to prevalent ideas on science, medicine, and the arts; such conversations were popular—even in remote locations in France.

The variation in the sources that appeared in a number of the provincial newspapers suggests that when readers picked up their local paper, they were connected to a larger information circuit that was especially connected to publications from the surrounding towns and from the capital. The particular collection of sources cited in each paper also indicate the
readership that the editors imagined for their papers—the geographic span of such letters was emblematic of the perceived audience of the papers.

REPRINTED LETTERS: WRITERS AND CONTENT
As a second level of analysis we can take a closer look at the content of the interconnected network of represented letters, evaluating the writers who penned them, and identifying the themes of their contributions. An evaluation of the authorship of such letters reveals similarities to the general body of letters to the editor, with a slight increase in those that were signed by their authors (See Table 2.4).^{45}

Table 2.4: The Percentage of Letters by Signature Type in Reprinted Letters and in All Letters, 1770-1787

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% Sample of Reprinted Letters</th>
<th>% All Letters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signed Letters</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous Letters</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonymous Letters</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initialed Letters</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This comparison shows that the proportions of letters in each category varied somewhat from the reprinted letters, but not dramatically from that of the general population of letters to the editor. The largest difference was a 10% increase in the proportion of anonymous letters. Significantly, the letters that were reprinted were not all written by famous people or previously published authors, although, one of the reprinted letters was by Voltaire, and Rousseau’s widow authored two others. Reprints were penned by a mix of individuals who chose to identify themselves in roughly the same way as the general population did. In terms of their social standings, the reprinted letter writers came from a variety of professions, but scientists and doctors formed the

^{45} To answer these questions, a sample of half (182) of all the 364 reprinted letters was evaluated by signature type, (signed, initialed, pseudonymous, or anonymous), in order to identify any major differences between the kinds of individuals who were published in general, and the kinds of individuals whose letters were reprinted.^{45} In general, the two groups were rather similar: 36% of the sample was anonymous; 9% of letters were initialed; 8% of writers signed with pen names; and 45% of the letters were signed.
majority.46 Lawyers, artists, and clergy formed a disproportionately smaller subset. Indeed, the majority of letters were penned by a relatively unknown group of contributors. Thus, letters that were reprinted did not function simply as a way to hear what famous people were saying, but also provided a way to spread ideas that were deemed by the editor to be interesting to the public.

Indeed, the subject matter of the reprinted letters may well explain their popularity, since the types of articles and the rhetorical strategies they adopted were more homogeneous in this group than amongst all the letters in my dissertation. Based on the content of the letter, the general topic of each letter was coded (See Figure 2.7).

46 Of the 364 total letters that were reprinted between 1770-1788, 122 gave an indication of the writer’s profession. Of those 122 who indicated a profession, 22% were in the medical profession; 18% were clergy; 9% were academicians; 8% were in the legal profession; 7% were in the government; 7% were written by women; 6% were members of the nobility; 3% were artisans; 3% were farmers; 2% of the writers belonged to each of the following professions: members of the military, writers, printers, scientists, artists, librarians, educators, or servants; and 1% were veterinarians.
Figure 2.7 indicates the percentage of reprinted letters, arranged by the topic of the letter. The percentage of reprinted letters on each topic are as follows: Arts: 6%; agriculture: 12%; commerce: 9%; current events: 6%; social welfare & improvement projects: 12%; medicine: 18%; science: 19%; avis divers: 18%. Comparative statistics to the entire corpus of letters in the dissertation is unavailable at this time. Summer revisions will allow for the completion of such a statistical comparison.

First, one of the major findings from Figure 2.7 was that the most frequently reprinted letters were on science, medicine, and avis divers. Letters concerning agriculture, or social welfare & improvement projects each comprised slightly less letters, with 12% each.47

47 Letters classified as social welfare & improvement projects included both letters on beneficent and charitable projects, and letters that covered practical topics like how to eradicate bedbugs, how to heat one’s home more efficiently, or how to store food more safely. See, for example, les
Contributions on the arts, commerce, and current events each made up less than 10% of the total correspondence. In comparison to the general content of all letters published in affiches and journaux at this time, proportionally less was reprinted on the arts and social welfare. Indeed, the reprinted letters tended to favor topics in science and medicine most heavily, with practical advice pieces on agriculture, home improvement, and public safety featuring prominently too. Such subject matter fit the material needs and interests of readers, underscoring the practical impulse that guided the provincial press throughout this period.

Amongst the published letters, five themes tended to predominate in the reprinted letters: science, medicine, agriculture, cautionary announcements, and beneficence. The majority of the letters on science concerned the advent of hot air balloons—a trendy topic that captured public imagination about the danger and possibilities of innovation. The range of themes addressed in such letters was emblematic of the popular fascination with this new technological breakthrough. When the voyages had taken place, what gases and mechanical processes made the flights possible, descriptions of what it was like to travel this way, and observations from a bird’s eye view were all covered. As such experiments tended to take place in the environs of Paris and Versailles, reprinting letters allowed provincial papers to present eyewitness accounts of events that took place far from the town where the paper was published.48

The letters on medicine that were republished described various maladies and how to treat them. There were quite a few on rabies that what to do with the dogs or wolves that were

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48 The Montgolfier brothers’ first demonstration was an exception to this geographic norm—they launched their balloon on June 4, 1783 from Annonay. For further discussion of the public fascination with ballooning, see, for example, Robert Darnton, Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968); Michael R. Lynn, The Sublime Invention: Ballooning in Europe, 1783-1820, The Enlightenment World (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010). Such letters receive further attention in Chapter 3.
affected, or what to do if the reader or one of their friends were bitten. Such letters were sober reminders that even those who lived in towns were not far removed from remote and wild spaces. The vivid depictions in the letters of roaming packs of dogs and wolves, of peasants wrestling such animals for their lives, or of afflicted patients suffering from bites underscored the dangers of living and traveling in the countryside. Such depictions of wild animals were rather commonplace; even Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe concluded the protagonist’s adventures with a frightening wolf attack in the Pyrenees. Other letters on medicine concerned implementing new techniques to combat illness: for instance, one letter on inoculation advocated the benefits of vaccinating one’s children, and set out to dispel rumored dangers of the procedure that were not true. Not all of the letters on medicine seemed to convey such sound advice—letters on the power of animal magnetism, the benefits of electrical treatments for epileptics, or the powers of cure-alls collected abroad were all reprinted in the provincial press. Reprinted letters on agriculture were concerned chiefly with three major goals: introducing food that would alleviate malnourishment; explaining the use of foodstuffs—especially nuts, acorns, and leaves—for medicinal purposes; and improving the cultivation of trees and vineyards so that they were less susceptible to harsh conditions like winter cold and

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49 See, especially, Les Affiches de Toulouse, April 26, 1786, 72; Ibid., June 1, 1785, 88; Les Affiches du Dauphiné, December 19, 1783, 140; Ibid., May 24, 1782, 14-16.  
50 Robinson Crusoe and his companions were attacked by wolves in chapter 20. Daniel Defoe, La vie et les aventures surprenantes de Robinson Crusoé, contenant son retour dans son isle, ses autres nouveaux voyages, & ses réflexions, Nouv. éd. ed., 4 vols. (Amsterdam,: Z. Chatelain, & fils, 1764). Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe was first published in English in 1719, much earlier than the letters in this dissertation were written. Nevertheless, Defoe’s popular work was reprinted and translated throughout the eighteenth century. The popularity of the subject matter generated an entire genre of “Robinsonade” literature, which shared the survivalist theme of Defoe’s original work.  
51 Les Affiches du Dauphiné, June 9, 1786, 22-23.  
52 Chapter 3 addresses the juxtaposition of letters by experts and charlatans in the press in greater detail.
hailstorms. The letters were instructive in tone, based on a practitioner’s experience with the success of a particular technique. Indeed, a pedagogical tone was common amongst the majority of reprinted letters.

Another group of such letters were public announcements designed to educate people in other towns. An announcement about two girls who died from playing in a mill explained the victim’s injuries in ghastly detail as a warning to others. A missive on the problem of poor ventilation in detached cellars recounted the death of one man and near death of two others who were rescued from the poisoned air by the quick action of passersby. A note from the editors followed the letter, indicating that the government had advocated for the publication of this kind of contribution in an effort to warn people of the dangers of asphyxia, and to advise them on how to prevent it. Sometimes letters in this rhetorical frame offered lessons in mœurs, not in material dangers: a description of ill-fated lovers, "aveuglé par la passion" who killed themselves when they were unable to marry emphasized the danger of allowing infatuation to overpower all other emotions. Such correspondence struck a cautionary tone, conveying in vivid detail the horrors the victims had suffered.

53 On alleviating malnourishment with the potato, see, for example Les Affiches du Dauphiné, March 11, 1785, 193; Les Affiches de Poitou, December 14, 1786, 197-198; On medicinal uses of foodstuffs see, for example, Les Affiches du Dauphiné, June 25, 1783, 52; Les Affiches des trois évêchés et Lorraine, July 22, 1784, 237-238; On preventing devastation after hailstorms and cold winters, see, for example, Les Affiches du Dauphiné, July 15, 1785, 46; Les Affiches de Toulouse, July 24, 1782, 120-121.
54 Les Affiches du Dauphiné, April 20, 1787, 212; Les Affiches des trois évêchés et Lorraine, May 3, 1787, 141.
55 Les Affiches du Dauphiné, June 25, 1784, 37.
56 The letter emphasized, especially, the painful details of the young man’s death. After his young lover died from shooting herself, he took the pistol, but his first shot merely broke his jaw bone. His second shot was more fatal, but he did not expire for a quarter of an hour or so. Ibid, July 18, 1788, 58.
Letters on bienfaisance tended to rely on a shared rhetorical model: the authors described charitable acts that they had witnessed, in most cases by happenstance. On a walk around town or in one’s neighborhood the author would come upon a situation and witness an individual or group doing good for those in need. Moved by the beneficent act, the writers submitted their accounts of what had transpired to the newspaper in an effort to inspire others. The bienfaiteurs could come from a range of social stations—the king and other members of the royal family; a group of children on the occasion of their first communion who visited a prison; or a woman who agreed to take in and nurse an orphaned baby.57

An analysis of reprinting practices is useful, because it changes the way historians have considered the provincial press. Past work has tended to convey the provincial newspaper as a local organ, driven by local factors, i.e. the editors who published them, the intendants who censored and contributed to them, or the local market. Counter to this historiography, a networks analysis of reprinted letters paints a picture of integration and exchange. Editors drew upon one another’s work, and readers examined their local paper in relation to sources drawn from throughout the kingdom. They shared rhetorical strategies and thematic preoccupations that sought to inform the public and ameliorate material conditions, especially in more geographically remote places.

REPRINTED LETTERS & EDITORIAL INTERVENTION

A third level of analysis investigates the text of the reprinted letters in order to track the editorial changes evident in them. Will Slauter’s study of newspapers in the Atlantic world has shown that papers frequently cut content from other publications and pasted it into their own

57 On the bienfaisant royal family, see Les Affiches du Poitou, July 18, 1782, 114-115; on the group of children celebrating their first communion, see Les Affiches du Dauphiné, June 26, 1783, 52; on the woman who agreed to nurse the orphaned baby, see Les Affiches de Toulouse, May 18, 1785, 79-80.
paper. Such “moving paragraphs” were transported from one source to another without explanation or major changes to the content.\textsuperscript{58} This section interrogates letters that were reprinted multiple times to determine whether this larger Atlantic world trend held true for the French domestic press, and if letters were indeed reprinted, whether the editor's role in modifying the content of reprinted letters is evident. The goal is to examine whether editors were simply cutting information from one paper, or if they changed the letters at all, thus altering their meaning. Evidence of altered content can be informative for two reasons: first, it can provide some insight into how editors read and modified the content that they chose to print, a process that has proved almost impossible for historians to study. Second, it may provide a sense of how subscribers reading different provincial newspapers that had reprinted the same letter then interpreted the information. That is, if the letters were reprinted verbatim, the readers of the provincial papers that reprinted the original letter would experience the same content. If, instead, the editors had modified the original prior to reprinting it, readers of different provincial papers would have ostensibly read the same letter, but their interpretation of it would be based on different information that could potentially impede their ability to communicate with one another about the content of the letter.

The letters in this section were those that were reprinted at least twice in provincial affiches between 1770 and 1788. The sample consisted of all letters that specified that the letter had originally been addressed to another newspaper, i.e. a letter \textit{A l'Auteur du Journal de Paris} appearing in \textit{Les Affiches d'Angers}. By matching the dates on which letters were written, along with (where possible) the location where the letter was composed and the name of the author, a small subset of letters was identified. The instance of reprinted letters in several newspapers was

\textsuperscript{58} Will Slauter, "The Paragraph as Information Technology," \textit{Annales HSS} 67, no. 2 (2012).
rather rare. Indeed, the first occasion of reprinting a letter multiple times occurred in 1781. Between 1781 and 1788, fourteen letters were reprinted multiple times in the regional press. This practice of reprinting remained rather constant, with no major upward or downward trends for the period.

Twelve of the fourteen letters were taken from Parisian newspapers, which suggests that the circulation of the capital’s affiches and daily newspaper were widely read, at least among the editors of provincial papers. One of the two remaining letters originated from les Affiches de Moulins, where it was published on November 20, 1782. The other came from London’s Morning Herald, and concerned Mr. Harvey’s faithful dog. The newspapers that tended to republish content were based in the following French towns: Grenoble (10 reprinted letters), Metz (5), Toulouse (4), Poitiers (3), Angers (2), and one each from Dijon (1), Troyes (1), Rouen (1), and Orléans (1). Rather than printing letters from local subscribers, the editor of the Affiches de Dauphiné in Grenoble reprinted letters, perhaps owing to the lower literacy rate in the region, which no doubt limited the number of local subscribers to the paper. Amongst the rest of the newspapers, Poitiers, Toulouse, and Metz all reprinted a few of these most popular letters, which may well have been a reflection of the large number of letters overall that appeared in these three papers. The remaining publications printed fewer letters in general, which may explain the lesser numbers of reprints.

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59 Eight letters came from le Journal de Paris, while four were taken from le Journal général de France.
60 Les Affiches des trois évêchés et Lorraine, January 9, 1783, 12; Les Affiches de Toulouse, January 22, 1783, 18-19.
In order to explain why the rather small subset of letters that were reprinted did appear in numerous provincial affiches, the number of days between the letter’s first publication and its reprinting was calculated. This information tells us two things: first, whether it was possible that provincial editors were reprinting the letter after reading it in a provincial paper, or whether it was more likely that provincial editors subscribed to newspapers in the capital, from which they drew content. The latter explanation would suggest that the letters that were reprinted multiple times were rather coincidental, with the editors likely acting independent of one another. Secondly, the length of delay between a letter’s first publication and its republication may shed light on whether popular letters were conceived as timely, newsworthy pieces, or as pieces that were relevant regardless of the delay from their original publication date.\(^{62}\) The mean number of days between publication in the provincial affiches for the fourteen letters was 17 days. For all but four of the letters, there was more than a week’s delay between each republication, so it seems possible that the second affiches to print the letter could have taken the content of the letter either from the Parisian journal that printed the letter, or the provincial affiches. The delays suggest that reprinted material was not printed because it was timely, but instead because it was salient. Such letters spoke to ongoing questions or problems that were not particularly time sensitive.

The authors of these popular reprinted missives tended to be unknown. They signed their contributions in less than half of the republications: five of the fourteen letters were signed, two

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\(^{62}\) For nine of the reprinted letters, the date of composition was indicated in the publication in which it was reprinted, which allowed for a calculation of the number of days between when it was first published and when other newspapers picked up the letter. The longest delay between when a letter was originally printed and when it was reprinted by one of the provincial affiches was 119 days. The mean delay was 34 days, although five of the letters were reprinted within less than a month of when they were first published. The delay between when a letter was reprinted in a provincial affiches and when it appeared in other provincial affiches was less extreme in its variation. Three letters appeared the day after another affiches printed the letter.
were initialed and seven were unsigned. Amongst the signed letters, three were penned by previously published authors: the chemist, Louis-Bernard Guyton de Morveau; the writer and Capucin cleric Jean-François Dougados Venance; and the meteorologist clergyman Louis Cotte. In the case of both the signed letters and the anonymous ones, the subject matter of the letters tended to reflect the professional expertise of the authors. One letter was on the law, one was on a literary topic, four letters addressed medicine and public health, and five letters concerned themselves with science.

The content of the letters tended to draw on popular themes of scientific innovation and social improvement. Amongst the five letters on science, three were about the hot air balloons that had sparked public imagination in 1783 and 1784. Beyond this period, the popular reprints on science touched on other topics that garnered public interest in scientific advancements or public health improvements. The rhetorical strategies of these letters relied upon a shared structure: the letters began by presenting a problem to which the readership could relate. For example, Cotte’s letter that originally appeared in the *Journal général de France* began by explaining the damage that hailstorms had caused to crops. While the body of the letter that

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63 For Morveau, see *Les Affiches du Dauphiné*, January 16, 1784, 154-155; *Les Affiches de Dijon*, January 13, 1784, 43; For Venance, see *Les Affiches du Dauphiné*, September 26, 1788, 109; *Les Affiches de Toulouse*, October 15, 1788, 171; For Cotte, see *Les Affiches du Dauphiné*, August 15, 1788, 77-78; *Les Affiches des trois évêchés et Lorraine* August 14, 1788, 259-260. The remaining two signed letters were by Cavaillon and by Delunel. Based on internet searches of the Bibliotheque national de France’s catalog, and google.fr searches, I was unable to identify these two authors. For Delunel, see *Les Affiches d’Angers*, January 31, 1788, 27; *Les Affiches du Poitou*, February 14, 1788, 25; For Cavaillon, see *Les Affiches du Dauphiné*, November 10, 1786, 117-118; *Les Affiches de Troyes*, November 22, 1786, 187-188.


followed explained the meteorological conditions under which hail forms, the letter began by introducing a problem that was common to the lived experience of residents in the provinces where the letter was reprinted. The body of most of the letters were pedagogical in nature—responding to the public fascination with science, they set out to explain how things worked, whether it was a question of the Montgolfiers’ balloons, a more hygienic latrine system, or an investigation into what was making people sick who had used bottles from Souvigny. Such letters not only broke down complex problems into manageable explanations; they also emphasized the public utility that their letters served—by solving mysteries and improving daily life.

Finally, letters that were reprinted multiple times lent insight into the editorial decision-making process. Since little documentation of how editors chose what to publish exists in the form of diary entries, notebooks, or other manuscript sources, the historian must rely on the internal evidence of the publications, themselves. Comparison of the same published letter reprinted in multiple newspapers provides some sense of how editors modified the content that they printed. The letters evaluated in this section were reprinted multiple times, and appeared in at least three venues: the original site of publication and in at least two of the provincial affiches consulted in this dissertation. In one case the paragraph breaks were removed, perhaps to make the text fit the available space. In all but two of the letters, the text was printed with the same wording from one newspaper to the next. Word-for-word reprinting of content seems to have been the common trend, as Will Slauter’s analysis of papers in the Atlantic context has suggested.67

66 Les Affiches d’Angers, January 31, 1788, 27; Les Affiches de Poitiers, February 14, 1788, 25.
67 Slauter, "The Paragraph as Information Technology."
In two cases, the editor altered the content of the letters. In one instance, the two reprints appeared just a day apart, in the *Affiches du Dauphiné* and in the *Affiches du Poitou*. In this instance, the short delay between publication in Grenoble and Poitiers suggests that the editors each received a copy of *le Journal de Paris* (where the letter first appeared), and reprinted the letter independent of the actions of the other provincial editor. A comparison of the two letters shows that the first paragraphs were identical, but the letter was much longer in the Poitevin paper. Rather than summarizing the content of the letter, Madame Giroud simply printed the first paragraph of the longer missive in her *Affiches du Dauphiné*. Aside from shortening the letter, there were no changes in form or content to these popular reprinted letters. Why Madame Giroud printed only the first paragraph is unclear. Perhaps she was looking for a short piece to fill blank space on the newspaper page, and the letter’s first paragraph fit the content needs of the paper.

In the only other letter that was modified, the editors altered the word choice in one paragraph, which described the role of procureurs:

> Aux yeux de l’homme, injustement prévenu, un Procureur ne paraît qu’un suppôt de la chicane ; mais il se présente quelquefois sous un aspect bien différent aux yeux du Philosophe, c’est-à-dire, (car ce mot a grandement besoin d’explication, surtout dans le siècle où nous sommes,) aux yeux du Sage qui juge les états, & ceux qui les exercent, sans aigreur & sans prévention.

The second reprint appeared a fortnight later in a somewhat different format:

> Aux yeux du Philosophe, injustement prévenu un Procureur a toujours passé pour un être extraordinaire, mais il se présente sous un aspect bien différent aux yeux du sage, qui juge les états, & ceux qui les exercent, sans aigreur & sans prévention.

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69 *Les Affiches des trois évêchés et Lorraine*, January 9, 1783, 12.
The second excerpt, taken from the *Affiches de Toulouse*, was shorter, but it also conveyed a different portrait of a procureur. The first quotation from *Les Affiches des trois évêchés et Lorraine* in Metz set up two views of the procureur—one seen through the eyes of an everyday man, and one seen through the eyes of a philosophe, whom the writer defined as a wise judge absent of prejudice or bitterness. To the everyday man, a procureur appeared as petty and duplicitous; but to the wise man, a procureur was seen in a more positive light. In the Toulousain paper, the paragraph had been altered, and the juxtaposition of the two viewpoints was removed. In the eyes of the philosophe, a procureur was a good man falsely accused, though to the wise man he appeared in a different light. This change juxtaposes the wise man and the philosophe, not the wise man and the everyday man. The editor’s role in curating the material that found its way to the published page is evident in this example. It seems the editor of the *Affiches de Toulouse* altered the text to fit his own view of philosophes, or to satisfy the local intendant who censored his newspaper. It is also important to note, though, that in only one of fourteen letters did the editor modify the text in any way. If such habits hold true for the content of the newspapers more generally, one might anticipate that most of the time editors reprinted the letters they received as-is, and that when content was modified, it was altered to fit the constraints of a page, or occasionally to match the ideologies of the editors or their censors.

CONCLUSION

The study of information transfer through the lens of networks alters the understanding of the French domestic press by conceiving of it as an integrated system across which information was shared, and by sketching out the timing, geography, and scope of such information exchange. A networks analysis of the letters conveys that letters were reprinted throughout France, and that letters from the capital were disseminated throughout the kingdom, connecting the provinces to
the hub of Paris. Furthermore, the connections between newspapers tended to favor information sharing between newspapers that were published in geographically proximate places, although occasional letters from newspapers published abroad also circulated in the affiches. Bringing new visualization tools to bear on this source reveals a rather integrated community, by which readers gathered information.

By focusing in to evaluate the content of the letters, one might measure whether letters that were reprinted were unique in some manner to the overall content of letters to the editor. Indeed, a comparison of the signatures and the themes of reprinted letters suggests that, in general, the reprints were rather representative of the content of letters more generally.

An analysis of the word-for-word content of popular letters investigated the extent of editorial intervention in letters reprinted in at least two of the newspapers under study. Ultimately, the investigation of a small sample of such missives reveals that, in general, editors simply cut the content from another paper and placed it in their own. Moreover, the letters that were reprinted tended to be on salient topics that would appeal to the material needs and practical interests of readers; the delay between their original print date and their reprint date was often a month, so newsy topics of a time-sensitive nature were virtually ignored.

Letters to the editor in late eighteenth-century France formed a network of exchange that circulated ideas about science, medicine, and social improvement throughout France. Newspapers were active in this process—structuring their papers around debates, inviting responses from their readers, and printing letters from their subscribers and from other newspapers. While the majority of letters originated in the town where they were published, affiches also printed correspondence from the surrounding region, the capital, and abroad, which was gleaned from other newspapers. The analysis of this information network also underscores
the significant interaction between provincial papers and more specialized papers, and the
prevalence of regional ties evidenced by the frequency of reprinting letters from nearby towns.
Indeed, the forum of letters to the editor was not solely a forum for the subscribers of a paper
who lived in the same town, but a virtual forum of sorts, that connected readers across France
through the newspaper page.
“Les esprits sont tendus vers cet objet; les têtes s’échauffent & il faut espérer que dans un siècle aussi éclairé que celui-ci; il ne faudra que bien peu de temps, pour tirer de la sublime découverte de MM. de Montgolfier, le meilleur parti possible.”  

INTRODUCTION

In November 1783, a letter to the editor appeared in the *Affiches de Toulouse* that likened the introduction of hot air balloons to Archimedes’ famous lever. “Tout Paris, Monsieur, toute la France, toute l’Europe est occupée dans ce moment du Ballon aérostatique,” the letter read, “physiciens & non physiciens, tout le monde célèbre la gloire si justement acquise de MM. de Montgolfier.” The writer referred to Archimedes who had first discovered the physical principles which, the writer believed, were responsible for the Montgolfier brothers’ flight. He wrote triumphantly about the uniqueness of the age in which he lived, when “il a fallu cependant deux mille ans pour murir le fruit de ce principe.” The Montgolfiers had discovered the natural laws that governed the physical world, and their Montgolfière demonstrated to scientists and laypersons alike the tangible, spectacular outcome of a centuries-long process. This brief letter highlighted some of the major themes that characterized letters to the editor on scientific topics: it expressed a fascination with the visual, spectacular outcomes of scientific discovery. Lauding the significance of an innovation reflected the way that men and women in the late eighteenth century conceptualized the limits of human understanding and the potential for future breakthroughs. This letter also drew the reader’s attention to the key figures who had made such

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an accomplishment possible, in this case the Montgolfier brothers. Such notions of expertise and
celebrity were new and unique to the eighteenth century, and their definition and evolution have
become popular categories of analysis for historians in recent years. Letters to the editor allow
for an investigation into how literate men and women understood the human potential to
transform society through science, technology, and medicine.

This chapter is a case study of popular medicine and popular science as they were
articulated and debated in letters to the editor in 1783-1784. These years were selected because
they illustrated the advent of hot air balloons in France—a topic that inspired public imagination
and influenced the letters to the editor in every newspaper under study. The sources are eight
provincial affiches that were active and publishing letters to the editor at that time, which
consisted of some 320 letters among the eight towns. During the two-year period of 1783 and
1784, nearly half of all of the letters were on topics related to science, medicine, or agricultural
topics that intersected with the former two subjects. The content of letters on science and
medicine ranged from the spectacular to the banal. The breadth of topics, combined with the
rhetorical strategies employed in such letters suggest that the Enlightenment is not a canon of
certain philosophes’ texts, but instead a psychology and epistemology about the capacity of

3 Lilti identifies célébrité as “a specific form of notoriety, in which a person is well known,
during his lifetime, by people who don’t know him personally but who may identify with him.”
Newspapers and literacy were central to this phenomenon, which peaked in the 1760s-1780s.
See, especially, Antoine Lilti, "The Writing of Paranoia: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the
Paradoxes of Celebrity," Representations 103, no. 1 (2008). For a recent discussion of the rise of
expertise in the eighteenth century, see Spary, Eating the Enlightenment: Food and the Sciences
in Paris.
4 The provincial affiches were published in Angers, Dijon, Grenoble, Metz, Orléans, Poitiers,
Toulouse, and Troyes. At this time, the sample of the Journal de Paris that has already been
coded into the dissertation database does not include 1783-1784. Letters from le Journal de
Paris that are thematically relevant to this chapter are used as illustration of key discursive trends,
not as a complete analysis of the content of the Parisian daily.
5 Some 167 letters were published in 1783-1784 on medicine, science, and agriculture.
humanity to change the world. Using a series of case studies that focus on letters on ballooning, electricity, and provincial medicine, this chapter explores how writers formulated ideas about the process of scientific discovery and the purposes of new knowledge.  

By bringing the analysis of such letters to bear on whether there was a clear dichotomy in the tone and topics of letters penned by experts, amateurs, and charlatans, my work interrogates a key historiographic question in the history of science, and especially in the work of Jessica Riskin and E. C. Spary.

BALLOONOMANIA

Machines aérostatiques dominated the letters to the editor in 1783-1784. Amongst the 84 letters published on scientific topics in the two-year period, 59 of them concerned the globes aérostatiques that fascinated the public. Especially in the early months of the period, such letters tended to convey eyewitness accounts of ascensions, which were usually conducted in Paris and its environs. Over time, the impulse in the letters shifted to raising funds for a particular city’s own project to launch a balloon. The desire to take part in this phenomenon was widespread, and a number of notables in the towns, along with Academicians, sponsored projects and solicited donations. Amateurs also took part in the conversation by proffering advice on ways to apply or improve the nascent technology.

The first letter to the editor in the provincial press on ballooning was a reprint from le Journal de Paris that appeared in the Affiches du Dauphiné on September 19, 1783. The letter opened triumphantly, declaring “tous les Physiciens doivent, je pense, croire actuellement à la possibilité de la navigation aérienne.” The hard work of getting the balloon into the air accomplished, Montgolfier thought it would be rather simple to sort out the steering, takeoff, and

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6 Fifty-nine letters were printed concerned ballooning, nine addressed electricity, and 49 covered topics related to medicine.

landing. The best way to make this happen was to get specialists to collaborate on such problems through a “Société de Savants & d’Amateurs qui veuillent faire les frais des expériences qui conduiraient à la construction d’un globe, fait de manière à cheminer plusieurs lieues par aire, je le monterai & le conduirai.” The letter ended with a rather rare comment that specified exactly who the writer was addressing: “Protecteurs des Sciences, Savants illustres, Artistes renommés, c’est à vous qu’il appartient de faciliter & perfectionner cette sublime découverte, qui doit prouver, plus qu’aucune qui ait jamais été faite, la puissance & la génie de l’homme.”

He wrote to elites. Such an aside grants the historian insight into the audience the author anticipated would read his letter.

During the fall of 1783 and the winter of 1784, the letters on ballooning attempted to reproduce in the readers’ mind’s eye the spectacle of the early ballooning demonstrations. More than that, though, such letters gave the reader an understanding of how the scientific process worked. Such contributions generally conformed to an outline where the writer walked his reader through the experiment. Oftentimes, the writer related a series of experiments, which were modified slightly each time the experiment was conducted in order to measure the effect of such changes on the result. The correspondence also emphasized precision—the size of the balloon, the weight of the structure, the exact height the balloon reached, and how long it remained aloft. For example, the affiches in Grenoble printed a letter on the Montgolfier brothers’ newest balloon, citing its height, its diameter, its weight, and the size of the basket that carried passengers. Barthélemy Faujas Saint-Fond, a prominent geologist who was fascinated by ballooning, and published descriptions of experiments conducted with aerostats machines in

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8 *Les Affiches de Dauphiné*, September 19, 1783, 85-86.
1783 and 1784, penned such a letter.⁹ Faujas Saint-Fond outlined a series of experiments that had recently been conducted on October 15, 1783 which had attracted experts and amateurs alike: “L’on avait eu attention de prévenir que les expériences qu’on avait le projet de faire avec cette belle machine, regardaient essentiellement les Savants, & que plus elles étaient intéressants pour la Physique, moins elles devaient amuser les personnes que la simple curiosité y attirerait.” The balloon, which was piloted by Pîlatre de Rozier, ascended into the air to 80 feet, “c’est a dire, jusqu’à la longueur des cordes qui retenaient alors la machine qui resta en station quatre minutes & vingt-cinq secondes.”¹⁰ (Pîlatre de Rozier was a celebrated aeronaut who was later killed in a ballooning experiment as he attempted to cross the English Channel.) Two days later on October 17, the balloonists performed the same exposition, but this time the wind did not cooperate, and the balloon would not alight. Such circumstances did not disappoint the other experts gathered, who understood the complexity of the situation, but the writer derided those who attended simply for the show:

les personnes exercées dans l’art des expériences, & qui savent de combien de circonstances elles dépendent, n’en furent pas moins satisfaites ; mais toutes celles qui n’avaient sollicité des invitations que dans l’intention d’assister à une espèce de fête, ou peut-être dans un esprit de critique, n’entrèrent pas dans ces considérations.

The third experiment took place on the 19th, “en présence de plus de deux mille personnes.” The machine was filled with hot air within 5 minutes, and de Rozier went up to 200 feet, and he stayed there for 6 minutes without having to reheat it. Next, they repeated the same experiment, this time reheating the balloon and ascending to 250 feet, where de Rozièr stayed for eight and a half minutes. The wind swept him toward some trees, so he renewed the gas to regain

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equilibrium, “en s’élevant pompeusement dans l’air au bruit des acclamations publiques.” Then, the same experiment was repeated a third time, this time with a M. Giroud de Villette accompanying de Rozier. The two pilots ascended to the end of the balloon’s tether, which measured 324 feet, where they stayed for nine minutes, although “plusieurs personnes affirment qu’elle a été en station près d’un quart-d’heure, mais je n’ai compté que neuf minutes à ma montre.” Finally, the fourth experiment repeated the third experiment, though this time de Rozier was instead accompanied by le Marquis d’Arlandes for an eight and a half minute flight. The letter closed with a statement that “les succès progressifs de ces diverses expériences, sont la meilleur réponse qu’on puisse faire aux détracteurs de cette étonnante machine.”

As time passed, letters on balloons departed from following the early, big demonstrations made by famous aeronauts, and instead tended to focus on other goals: bringing similar demonstrations to their own town; improving the technology behind the globes aérostatiques; or using the public interest in balloons to advertise one’s own scientific endeavors.

Letters focused on bringing balloons to provincial centers emphasized their goal to expose the local community to the scientific breakthroughs that scientists and spectators alike had witnessed near the capital. A letter printed in the *Affiches d’Angers* expressed disappointment at the lack of support for bringing a balloon to Angers: “dans l’enthusiasme universel qu’on inspire MM. Montgolfier & leurs imitateurs, j’étais affligé de voir l’espèce d’immobilité de mes compatriotes, citoyens comme moi d’une Ville où toutes les sciences sont professées depuis plus de trois siècles.” He complained of the tremendous cost of such large-scale balloon experiments, which were captivating but expensive endeavors that required substantial resources. Other contributions to the provincial affiches went further by raising funds

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11 Ibid.
12 *Les Affiches d’Angers*, December 12, 1783, 207.
to support the building of balloons throughout France. In Dijon, a letter writer solicited subscriptions for an aerostat in Burgundy, which the local Academy was co-sponsoring. The writer took the public response to his call for contributions as a sign of “l’intérêt général que ce projet a excité parmi nos Concitoyens.” The “rapidité avec laquelle les soixante premiers billets ont été placés,” gave the writer confidence that the public understood and supported “l’importance de cette Expérience.” The letter concluded with a brief note that the total cost of such a balloon was 7,000 livres, and that the subscription would remain open until all the costs were covered. The same style of letter requesting subscriptions for a balloon in the town of Angers appeared in the local affiches in February. Follow-up reports on fundraising efforts appeared in the subsequent months. In the case of Dijon, a letter appeared just three weeks later to update local readers on the balloon under construction by the Dijonais Académie. The writer expected the balloon, which would measure 27 feet in diameter and would carry two passengers, to be ready within two more weeks’ time. The work of early aeronauts like the Montgolfiers, Charles, and Pilatre de Rozier, had “échauffés tous les esprits jusques dans les Provinces,” spurring the construction of balloons and the continued experimentation that such machines aémade possible. In Nancy, balloon experiments conducted by a Professeur Nicolas led a writer to declare that “chaque Province a eu son Montgolfier & la Lorraine tout comme une autre a voulu lancer un Ballon.” Such demonstrations fed the popular interest in ballooning, which led to a mania of sorts where, “On ne rêve, on ne parle que de Globes aérostatiques; on dirait que

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13 *Les Affiches de Dijon*, December 23, 1783, 32.
14 Ibid., 134-135.
15 *Les Affiches d’Angers*, February 20, 1784, 35.
16 *Les Affiches de Dijon*, January 13, 1784, 43.
tous les cerveaux ont reçu une certaine dose de ce gaz inflammable renfermé dans cette
etonnante machine, qui dans le fond cesse de l’être quand on en connaît la cause motrice.”

From the beginning of its coverage in the provincial press, balloonomania not only
captured the imagination of the public, but also sought to explain and educate readers through
technical descriptions of the balloons and detailed records of their flights. A number of letters
that appeared in provincial papers were preoccupied with convincing the public that flight was
possible, and they were frequently reprinted from Parisian papers. Blanchard’s letter to the
Journal de Paris appeared in Grenoble on October 3 to assure the public that, indeed, aerial
navigation had already occurred: “permettez que j’entre en lice avec vous, pour vous disputer
l’honneur du premier navigateur aérien.” He couched his defense of his flight as a matter of
personal honor. He could navigate the balloon effectively, and he invited the public to come see
a demonstration if they did not believe him. He confidently proclaimed, “je jouis d’avance du
plaisir de partager avec vous l’honneur du premier navigateur aérien.” The editorial postscript
on the letter in Grenoble highlighted the validity and momentousness of such an
accomplishment: “ce M. Blanchard est celui qui promet depuis longtemps de voyager dans l’air
sur un bateau volant.” The paper corroborated his accomplishment, testifying that the goal that
Blanchard had long ago set had now come to fruition. A second letter dealt with the
Montgolfiers’ demonstration of their Machine Aérostatique that had taken place at the Champs
de Mars on September 19. This account was more technical in nature, explaining in greater
detail the properties that made flight possible. In particular, the writer explained the kind of gas

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17 Les Affiches des trois Evêchés et Lorraine, January 1, 1784, 4.
18 Les Affiches de Dauphiné, October 3, 1783, 94.
that Montgolfier used, “offrant un phénomène absolument neuf.” The chemical process he employed was explained as follows:

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\text{gaz qu’il obtient en brûlant tout simplement de la paille humide & une substance animale, telle que la laine: quarante sols de ces matières combustibles & dix minutes de temps, ont fourni les 42,000 pieds cubes nécessaire de gaz, & on ne se serait pas procuré pareil volume d’air inflammable, à moins peut-être de 8 ou 10 mille francs.}
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The author was confident that his technique was particularly useful, because it allowed for refueling the balloon. Such benefits were critical to the success of the balloon as a floating laboratory of sorts; the writer characterized the Machine aérostatique as a space for observation and experimentation ideal for investigations into the buildup of electricity and condensation that produced rain, and various other experiments on clouds. He ended his letter with a quote taken from Montgolfier, “qui, interrogé sur cette découverte, répondit: c’est l’enfant qui vient de naître.” Such a preoccupation with the possibilities in a nascent innovation communicated the excitement that riveted people at this time. Indeed, the editorial postscript to this letter accentuated the point. The editors wrote that they had received, “une prodigieuse quantité” of letters on the subject of machines aérostatiques asking for more information on how they work, what improvements would make them work better, etc., and the editors intended to satisfy all the questions the public had. In the mean time, they directed their readers toward a brochure that covered such topics.20

Incremental advancements in experiments grew as the number of balloons—and aeronauts—in the provinces spread. A letter written by the aeronaut Robert brothers, appearing in the Affiches du Dauphiné at the end of November, followed earlier letters in format and structure. They specified the dimensions of the balloon, the location where the experiments

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
would take place, and the series of small changes that would be added in each experiment.

Where they differed from previous letters, though, was that the Robert brothers intended to cut their balloon loose once they had completed some early tests: “nous voguerons dans l’atmosphère à Ballon perdu. Nous nous servirons pour monter & descendre à volonté de moyens aussi sûrs que simples, que M. Charles fera connaitre à la fin du Mémoire historique.”

This ballon perdu caught public attention, especially in the region where it flew. A letter by a M. Queignard, fils, appearing in the Affiches de Troyes chronicled the event in great detail: the “plus de six cent mille âmes remplissait le Jardin, la Place Louis XV, les Ponts, les Quais & les rues adjacentes.” The balloon, draped in bands of red and yellow taffeta, was piloted by Jacques Charles and the Robert Brothers, who carried a white flag and a red flag so that they could signal from the balloon. After three canon blasts, the experiment began, and a little balloon of green taffeta, was launched by Montgolfier, himself. The unmanned balloon ascended quickly until, “en moins de cinq minutes, on ne le voyait plus que comme une petite étoile,” finally disappearing from sight. Then Charles and the brothers Robert took off in the large balloon, dedicating the flight to Montgolfier. As the balloon ascended, “le soleil répandait sur cette Machine une magnificence qui ravissait.” Queignard compared the balloon drenched in sunlight to the image of God coming down from heaven, crowned in rays of light. Asking his fellow readers’ pardon for the comparison, his allusion drew attention to the sublime effect the demonstration had on those gathered—there was not a single spectator who did not marvel. The crowd was overcome by “la stupéfaction causé par le mélange de surprise, de crainte & d’admiration,” was quickly followed by “des applaudissements réitérés, on ne les voyait plus, qu’on avait toujours les yeux fixes vers l’endroit où ils avaient disparu. L’imagination se portrait

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21 Ibid, November 28, 1783, 127.
avec eux dans la vaste région de l’air.”

As the balloonists disappeared from view, the public’s imagination went with them, captivated by the splendor and audacity of flight.

The letter ended with a few words about where the two balloons had landed. First, the manned balloon landed after nearly four hours of flight on the plains near Nesle and d’Hédouville. Charles decided to take the balloon up again after this landing, and after another four-hour journey he landed at Tour-de-Lay. The unmanned little green balloon had been taken west by the wind, and had landed in the donjon of the Chateau de Versailles. A letter written by the Duc de Chartres appeared in the *Affiches du Dauphiné* corroborating the account of Charles’ and the Robert brothers’ landing points along their ballon perdu travels.23

The records of the aeronaut’s voyages conveyed the concept that each balloon flight was an experiment in itself. Letters by participants in such voyages brought firsthand accounts of the thrill of flight and of the scientific potential that balloons held. Such missives often profiled the aeronauts, giving their fellow readers a glimpse of the innovators in action. References to their bravery, their adeptness in maneuvering the balloon, their fortitude and solemn demeanor as they flew untethered through the countryside bolstered the cult of celebrity that followed such men. Giroud de Villette, who accompanied de Rozier on the October 19 experiment described in the previous paragraph also wrote a letter about his experience that emphasized the personality of the pilot. He praised and exclaimed about what an honor it was to accompany de Rozier, “son courage, son agilité, ses talents à bien manœuvrer & conduire son feu m’enchantèrent.” Once they were airborne, Giroud de Villette surveyed the city below them: “en me retournant je distinguai les boulevards depuis la porte S. Antoine jusqu’à celle de S. Martin tout couverts de monde, qui me paraissait former un plate-bande allongée de fleurs varies.”

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22 *Les Affiches de Troyes*, December 10, 1783, 199-200
Montmartre appeared to be less than half the height of the balloon; Giroud de Villete then “promenai ma vue dans le lointain” to the outlying suburbs, where he easily identified Neuilly, S. Cloud, Sève, Issy, Ivry, Charenton, Choisy & peut-être Corbeil.” This bird’s-eye view of Paris not only produced wonder, but focused the writer on the balloon’s utility “que le temps nous perfectionnera.” From this vantage point, war could be revolutionized: “cette Machine, peu dispendieuse, serait très-utile dans une armée pour découvrir la position de celle de son ennemi, ses manœuvres, ses marches, ses dispositions, & les annoncer par des signaux aux troupes alliés de la Machine.”

He believed that balloons could be effective over sea too. While in some letters the balloon’s flight is the extent of the experiment, letters like this one suggested the potential utility the aérostats could serve. Whether, as in this instance, as an arm of military surveillance, or as other writers suggested as a laboratory for meteorological observation and experimentation, balloons were understood as both a symbol and a site of future innovation.

Letters in the early months of ballooning emphasized the possibilities that such technology could facilitate. The globes aérostatiques would serve as laboratories that would unlock the secrets of electricity. They would transform military strategy by scouting enemy lines. Balloons embodied the ideals of the age, and they presented a tangible reality of those ideals made manifest and put to work to transform human understanding. Moreover, the balloonists themselves emphasized their critical role in mastering nature and enlightening humankind. They also believed themselves to be bold adventurers willing to push the limits of human ability for fame. In the letters they penned, they emphasized the audacity and uniqueness of their feat. Blanchard’s letter from September included the phrase, “La récompense de mon

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24 Ibid., November 7, 1783, 116.
25 Ibid.
audace sera l’honneur d’avoir été le premier navigateur aérien.”

Being among the first took boldness. The honor and fame that early balloonists garnered helped them justify the danger they undertook, and it likely drew a larger audience to the spectacle. Drawing on classical allusions, another anonymous balloonist wrote that “je serai moi-même dedans [in the balloon] & j’ai assez de confiance dans mon procédé, pour ne pas craindre le sort d’Icare.”

The suggestions writers submitted to their local newspaper conveyed both the enthusiasm they felt for innovation, and the limits of their own scientific understanding. Indeed, a number of the letters suggesting improvements made clear that readers did not understand exactly how the balloons worked. Some letters suggesting improvements recommended different materials be used to construct the balloon, or that the balloon’s power source be modified. One such suggestion appeared in the affiches published in Metz, recommending that the balloon be covered in leather. Similarly, an epistle printed in the *Affiches de Toulouse* suggested constructing a balloon out of paper. Still others wrote suggestions for cost-effective solutions for powering the balloons. Correspondence addressed to the editors of the *Journal de Paris* that circulated in the affiches in Grenoble and Metz recommended the construction of a machine powered “par les seuls moyens mécaniques, sans le secours de la physique.”

An anonymous letter in Metz suggested powering the balloon with electricity. Some writers with more technical expertise in the chemistry involved in the ballons aérostatiques provided suggestions on how different forms of gas might effect the balloon’s flight. For example, M. Proust wrote to the

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26 Ibid., September 19, 1783, 85-86.
27 Ibid., October 3, 1783, 94.
editors of the *Affiches d’Angers* to convey the results of his experiments on various forms of gas and their effect on balloons launched from the local Chateau’s courtyard.\(^3^2\)

One of the most predominant problems that the early aeronauts faced was that they had little ability to steer the balloons once they were in the air, leaving them at the mercy of the wind. The challenge of steering continued to plague balloonists throughout the nineteenth century. During the Franco-Prussian War, French forces in Paris used balloons for reconnaissance and communication with forces outside the besieged capital. Unable to control the steering of the balloons, they were swept by the wind off course, hampering their military strategic efforts. A letter that appeared in the *Affiches du Dauphiné* identified this common problem, that “Toute l’attention des Savants & des Artistes paraît se tourner du côté de l’art de diriger la Machine Aérostatique.”\(^3^3\) The writer suggested, why not harness birds, as one would harness horses or oxen on land? He had even worked out the finer points that one would need to address in order to bring this idea to fruition. First, find the species of bird that would be the best for such a task. Second, train the birds to pull the balloon. Third, figure out how to best harness the birds for the takeoff and landing, which he recommended still be powered by gas. Fourth and finally, pinpoint the place on the balloon or the basket to affix the harness so that it would not tip the whole apparatus over.

Another suggestion for steering the balloons took an aquatic animal as its inspiration instead. A king’s secretary writing in to the *Affiches du Poitou* was so inspired by the great experiments with aerostats that he had seen in the environs of Poitiers that he felt he must contribute his own suggestions. Why not model the shape of the balloon after a fish, since fish could easily move up and down in elevation, and manage horizontal motion and steering with

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., April 2, 1784, 60.

\(^{33}\) *Les Affiches du Dauphiné*, February 6, 1784, 167.
ease? He suggested that flaps be attached to the balloon to help with steering. After all, he remarked, there are aquatic birds, why not a flying fish? \(^{34}\)

The last kind of letters on balloons used the public interest in spectacle to segue readers from machines aérostatiques to advertisements of other inventions. One man opened his letter with a declaration of how wonderful it was to live in an age of flying machines, but the body of his letter was concerned with his own contraption—shoes that enabled him to walk across water. He wrote to publicize his upcoming demonstration on the Seine from Pont Neuf to Pont Royal. Through his letter’s publication, he hoped to receive donations that might help him defray the cost of his travel to Paris, which the newspaper agreed to collect and document on the writer’s behalf. \(^{35}\) As this thinly veiled ad for a bogus invention illustrated, ballooning functioned as a way to get people excited about experimentation. While this letter was perhaps the most dramatic example, balloonomania functioned as a hook to advertise one’s own innovation or product. Writers also made use of this tactic to advertise their pamphlets that covered the latest experiments and demonstrations. Such transparent advertisements support Colin Jones’ argument that the affiches functioned above all else as a marketplace, where both goods and ideas circulated before reader-consumers. The space of the newspaper page was more diverse and somewhat more democratic than other public spheres because one’s social position was not as important as one’s position as a consumer. While it was by no means defined by egalitarianism, nor a venue where everyone talked to everyone else, the affiches offered a greater mixing of social groups and ideas than did other venues of debate and exchange. \(^{36}\) In this way, the affiches were rather similar to the café culture that Thierry Rigogne has examined, where

\(^{34}\) Les Affiches du Poitou, February 18, 1784, 29-30.
\(^{35}\) Les Affiches du Dauphiné, December 19, 1783, 139.
\(^{36}\) Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution."
businessmen, members of the liberal professions, artisans, and writers circulated in a shared space, even if in this case, they did not sit at the same table or converse directly with one another.  

Not all of the early letters on flight were positive. In fact, one of the first letters to the editor on this topic during the period made the implicit argument that ballooning could make one crazy. By far the most widely reprinted letter under study on the subject of ballooning was written to the *Journal général de France*, and reappeared in the affiches of Angers, Toulouse, Poitiers, Grenoble, and Metz in October 1783. Following the style of a Voltairian satire, the letter was penned by a Monsieur Blondel, and it recounted his efforts to save his uncle who had grown obsessed with ballooning.

Occupé, comme tous les gens de ce métier-là [ballooning] de cette maudite invention de Ballon aérostatique, dont Dieu veuille confondre les Auteurs, sa Gouvernante & moi étions sans cesse à lui dire « A quoi cela sert-il ? Laissez là toutes ces inventions nouvelles, il y a long-temps que tout est dit...Les novateurs & les nouveautés sont toujours dangereuses...Tous ces gens qui vont fouiller où ils n’ont que faire, font toujours une mauvaise fin. »

The letter related his uncle’s argument with a fellow *physicien* about the uncle’s plans for his own aérostat. After the argument, his uncle fell ill and then ran away. A series of follow-up letters inserted in provincial papers conveyed updates on the half-dressed and half-witted uncle, who appeared in his balloon throughout the countryside to offend gentlemen and scandalize ladies. This rather unusual letter was immensely popular, appearing in at least six newspapers over a two-week period, but why it became so popular remains unknown. Perhaps it was

38 *Affiches d’Angers*, October 10, 1783, 170-171; *Affiches de Toulouse*, October 15 (and the second half of the letter on October 22), 1783, 171; *Affiches du Poitou*, October 16, 1783, 165-166; *Affiches de Dauphiné*, October 17, 1783, 102-103; *Affiches des trois évêchés et lorraine*, October 23, 1783, 342-343.
because letters on ballooning topics dominated the newspaper page at this time, and this letter about a deranged uncle’s plans for an aerostat of his own certainly fit within the larger trend. Although it may well have been for sheer entertainment, it’s adaptation of the epistolary novel form and the tone of Voltairian satire likely spoke to contemporary readers. Based on the content of the letters and their popularity as reprints, it is very doubtful that this letter was true. Indeed, the story was especially dramatic and spectacular in comparison even to letters on the spectacle of ballooning. It is likely that these letters were stories in an epistolary novel of sorts, appearing in serial installments in the paper. On the other hand, it also seems possible that the letter was reprinted in an effort to help spread the word about a troubled man’s disappearance. Whatever the aims of the letter, it provided an interesting counterbalance to the optimistic narrative that ballooning often garnered. This rather negative critique of innovation stressed the destabilizing force that technological change could be, and the ambivalence the public could harbor about such changes.

Unlike most of the letters on science throughout the period of 1770-1788, which privileged incremental, practical improvements, the advent of the ballons aérostatiques represented a paradigm shift. The kinds of comments made about witnessing these balloons in flight focused on the spectacular, sublime experience. Such letters articulated a veritable balloonomania—the globes aérostatiques were all that anyone could talk about, dream about, think about. The letter with which this chapter opened sums up the way eighteenth century readers contextualized this innovation: after two millennia in the making, the Montgolfiers had fulfilled the work begun by Archimedes. The accomplishment of flight was a breakthrough, and the letters to the editor about this feat communicated a momentousness that was rather unusual for letters published in provincial papers. The desire to put globes aérostatiques to use appeared
within the first few months of the balloons’ existence. It was through the advice for further improvements, the suggestions for practical applications, and the advertisements of related goods that letters on balloons most closely aligned to the goals of letters to the editor on popular science more generally, providing a marketplace that made room for experts and amateurs alike.

ELECTRICITY

Letters concerning electricity differed from the published correspondence on ballooning in a few key ways. To be sure, letters on electricity were much more rare, comprising just 10% of the letters on science published between 1783-1784. Such contributions were also distinguished by their preoccupation with utility. Letters on lightning were concerned first with observation of natural phenomena, and then with the possibility of directing electrical power. Their language tended to focus on comprehending natural laws, the knowledge of which could then be used to ameliorate conditions in the countryside. Such letters touched profoundly on the theme of harnessing nature to suit the needs of humanity. To begin with, electricity in the form of lightning held a lethal power over provincial communities. One particularly vivid account was penned by an anonymous man writing from Beaumont de Lomagne, who contributed a letter to the *Affiches de Toulouse* (the nearest newspaper) on the lightning storm that had passed through his town that week. Without warning, the calm night vanished as,

> le Ciel disparut bientôt sous des nuages épais: le tonnerre dispersé sur tout notre horizon, s’annonça avec un bruit épouvantable, ses éclats multipliés & venus à la fois de différents endroits, produisaient une dissonance & un fracas si affreux, qu’ils pourraient seuls nous donner une idée de la dissolution du monde entier.

As the storm shrouded the town with chaos and fear, lightning struck in two places. First, the parish bell tower was hit, and the church and those inside it were enveloped in smoke. A second later, lightning struck the other end of town, hitting an artisan’s home. Although the artisan was hit, he miraculously survived. Aside from the holes bored in his hat and the singed hair on his
leg, he emerged rather unscathed from what the author assumed would have been a fatal incident. The man’s remarkable survival was the reason that the author decided to write the letter to the paper, since “les Journalistes recueillent avec empressement ces époques funestes, le public s’en entretient avec attendrissement, & je me plais à remarquer que cette curiosité de part & d’autre, dérive d’un fonds qui fait honneur à l’humanité.” While this particular writer emphasized the danger, chaos, and lack of control to which lightning reduced the countryside, other letters emphasized that this need not be the case. One contributor, a certain M. Joly, to the *Affiches de Troyes* explained that he penned his letter so that “ce météore si terrible pour le vulgaire,” might be explained and given order.40

Indeed, Joly’s letter to the editor conceptualized lightning as being only one of electricity’s many manifestations:

Aujourd’hui que les lumières et la saine Philosophie prévalent presque partout ; aujourd’hui que les fameuses expériences de Leyde & de Marli-la-Ville ne laissent aucun doute que le Tonnerre ne soit entre les mains de la nature, ce que l’électricité est dans les nôtres, & qu’ils procèdent tous deux du même principe, n’est-il pas étonnant que les esprits soient encore si violemment inclinés vers la superstition & la terreur, à l’approche des nuées.

Joly’s letter triumphantly asserted that electricity rested no longer in the hands of nature, but in those of men, who having unpacked the principles of electricity could now manipulate it to serve their own purposes. Summarizing the findings of famous experiments and demonstrations, he explained simply that “le fer isolé & exposé en plein air, qu’en général, tous les corps élevés & pointus attirent la foudre,” and that thunder “ne consiste que dans une ondulation de l’air.”41 The thorough investigations of physiciens, especially in “un siècle aussi éclairé que le nôtre, où des

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41 This seems to be a reference to the installation of lightning rods, which were widely advocated by Benjamin Franklin.
hommes naturellement Observateurs, examinant de plus en plus près ce phénomène, ont
découvert, & démontrent” the mechanisms that caused lightning to strike. After all, he argued,
lightning, like all natural phenomena “n’est qu’un effet des lois générales, établie pour la
conservation de l’univers, plutôt que pour sa destruction.”

He juxtaposed this clear, causal explanation with a description of the powerful force as it
occurred during a storm: “ce bruit imposant & majestueux qui retentit dans les airs, que ces
sillons étincelants qui percent le sein d’une nuée obscure, que ce mélange confus de lumière &
de ténèbres, de feu & d’eau.” Rather than fearing the forces that generated it, though, he argued
that the storm needed to be understood, “enfin que cet appareil frappant qui caractérise la
présence d’un nuée en action, est fait pour élever & non pour abattre l’âme de celui qui fait sentir
& connaître les merveilles de la nature.” Furthermore, it was not for himself that the scientist
felt compelled to explain such events, but for the peasantry he referred to as les vulgaires, who
feared lightning and the fires it sets. Letters on the fires that had ravaged their towns and
requests for donations for those who were injured or reduced to homelessness were a
commonplace in the affiches of the 1770s and 1780s.

While Joly’s letter was ultimately concerned with affixing lightning rods to the bell
towers of churches to prevent fires, he also argued that disseminating knowledge about the
causes of lightning was critical to the education of the rural populace. Once educated and
“purgées des préjugés & des erreurs, qui le subjuguent, à leur tour, à l’aide de ces hommes
privilégiés,” he argued that they could be brought “sous l’empire de la raison, des hommes que
l’utilité de leurs travaux rend si dignes d’elle.” Such campaigns for implementing lightning

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42 Les Affiches de Troyes, August 13, 1783, 132-133.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
rods circulated throughout France. A M. Buissart writing a letter from Arras noted comparative studies in Germany on the effectiveness of lightning rods, and “les expériences de M. Franklin” to bolster his claims. Citing Franklin’s findings, he asserted that lightning fell “le plus souvent, & presque toujours sur les Clochers, qui ont des croix de fer, sur les girouettes des maisons, sur les chênes & les sapins les plus élevés, & en général surtout ce qui surpasse les objets environnants, & qu'il suit ordinairement les métaux, les fils de fer, les cordes des cloches &c..” As Buissart saw it, the best solution was to plant a tall tree on the westernmost edge of each town and fix it with rods so that it would draw the lightning to the tree rather than to other tall edifices in the vicinity. Letters like those of Joly and Buissart preoccupied themselves with explaining natural laws in order to enlighten the peasantry and improve daily life in the countryside. Their preoccupation with utility was underscored by the detailed suggestions for practical implementation in their letters.

Discussions of harnessing electricity did not end with lightning rods, however. Indeed, finding ways to put this power to use appeared in letters on both science and medicine. For example, one anonymous letter capitalizing on the popularity of machines aérostatiques proposed an apparatus that was powered by electricity rather than expensive materials like gas. Despite the public’s dismissal of his project and the rumors he had heard questioning whether his invention had existed at all, he believed that given the right weather conditions, his “globe aérostati-électrique” would fly. Similarly, practitioners argued for the health benefits of

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46 *Les Affiches de Troyes*, February 12, 1783, 27.
electric shocks. In particular, such treatment was believed to be beneficial to those suffering from paralysis and convulsions. A M. Sans, who specified that he was not a doctor, explained his medical application of electricity in his “cabinet électrique,” which he found to be particularly effective in eradicating epilepsy in children. He corroborated his assertions with a recent demonstration at Versailles on nineteen children that had stopped their convulsions. His treatment, he assured the public, was safe and gentle: “la manière dont j’administre l’électricité est si douce & si facile que la mère la moins instruite guérit elle-même son enfant sans rien sentir, puisqu’il n’y a point d’étincelles ni de commotions; il n’y a donc aucun danger à craindre, mais au contraire, une guérison prompte.” Depicting his procedure as safe, effective, and fast-acting, he hoped to expand his form of treatment throughout the city in a number of cabinets, so that, “en l’établissant dans différentes quartiers des villes, on sauverait la dixième partie des enfants qui périt par les convulsions.” Monsieur Sans’ cabinet électrique adapted a new technological innovation to fit a social need. Harnessing the power of electricity, he posited a treatment for a common childhood affliction “au bien d’humanité.”  

Finally, nearly a third of the letters on the subject of electricity concerned amateur scientists interested in testing the properties of electricity that they had witnessed in demonstrations or read about in periodicals. One contributor from Versailles described himself thusly, “je ne suis ni médecin, ni Physicien; j’ai bien l’honneur d’être homme de lettres.” While not a trained specialist, he nevertheless saw himself as sufficiently educated and informed to run his own experiments at home. His test subject was his much beloved cat, Angora, who had recently begun to suffer from epilepsy. Rubbing her fur against the grain, he produced electric sparks in such a great quantity that the poor animal looked like she was on fire. He then

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recorded her responses, which he found to be consistent with the findings of government physicians and faculty doctors whose work had been published. “Sans perte de connaissance, point d’écume, mais une vivacité extrême,” the cat jumped ten feet in the air and moved around the room in “cet état forcené” for a half hour. Her owner feared she might injure herself in her agitated activity, but she calmed down and became more affectionate than ever. Three months later, she had presented no epileptic symptoms whatsoever. He concluded his letter with the request, “je laisse à Messieurs les Physiciens, le soin d’examiner cette cure extraordinaire sur un animal.” Not only did this amateur lay out his experiment and his findings, but he also submitted it to the newspaper so that his findings could be evaluated by a community of experts.49 His letter was reprinted in the *Affiches de Toulouse* the following week.50 Contributions like this one that related experiments with electricity were organized around the practice of experimentation. Amateurs like Angora’s anonymous owner introduced electricity as a stimulus, and then they recorded the results. His letter and other contributions by amateurs adopted a step-by-step, detailed approach, and they concluded with the request that the public conduct similar experiments and let them know what they found.

Some writers took their experiments a further step and tried out their ideas on human subjects. A M. Carra submitted to the *Affiches de Paris* his findings from an experiment that he and his friends had conducted.51 He explained the basic logistics of the experiment as follows: “J’ai fait mettre sur un isoloir une personne qui communiquait par une verge de métal au conducteur d’une machine électrique, & au moment où cette personne a été électrisée, j’ai

49 Ibid., March 12, 1784, 191-192.
He then recorded what his subject felt, what he himself felt, and then he modified the experiment to see what effect small changes would generate. For instance, he noted that when he placed sulfur rods in his jacket, the number and intensity of sparks between himself and his subject increased dramatically. Furthermore, by running his hands along the person’s body, “c’était un feu roulant d’électricité” that caused the subject to break out in a sweat. Rather than producing large sparks, he asserted that the electrical atmospheres, “se divisent en une infinité de petites commotions ou vibrations qui réagissent dans l’intérieur du corps de la personne électrisée, & occasionnent en elle une chaleur douce & la transpiration dont je viens de parler.” Then, Carra and his collaborators repeated the experiment twice more; Carra took a turn as the electrified subject and felt the same feverish effects, especially in the pit of his stomach. They also ran the same experiment using different garments, which led them to the conclusion that, “il faut observer que ces effets n’ont lieu que sur des habits de drap, & non sur des habits de soie.” He ended his letter by asking the public to help verify his results: “je laisse aux Amateurs le soin de répéter & de varier ces expériences.” The style and tone of Carra’s letter and of the letter written by Angora’s owner clearly specified the limits of the authors knowledge, but they did not surrender knowledge and the use of electricity to the purview of experts. Instead, such writers took part in experimentation, outlining for their fellow readers the problem, the treatment that they applied, and the results that they gathered. In the case of Carra, he had even repeated the experiment and modified it to track the effects. They also endeavored to replicate their findings by asking their fellow readers to repeat the experiments on their own and report back to their fellow readers.

The emphasis on experimentation and experience was deployed both to validate and to discredit the claims of fellow experimenters. For example, a M. Jal de Muntel wrote a letter critiquing the book that l’Abbé Bertholon had published on electricity. Questioning the abbé’s claims, he exclaimed, “peut-il croire de bonne-foi, qu’un homme guindé sur un isoloir puisse arroser, avec son eau électrifiée, un Domaine quelconque, ne fut-il pas plus grand que le Jardin de Ste. Genevieve?” or that an electric current in a garden could kill all the caterpillars? Finding the claims too outrageous to be believed, he tried to discredit the abbé with the reading public: “il a donc une étrange idée des ses Lecteurs!” His largest problem with the abbé’s book was that Bertholon had not actually conducted the experiments, nor did he provide clear proof that the experiments had worked. Jal de Muntel wanted evidence, not lofty assertions designed for a credulous public. “Nous ne sommes plus au temps de Pythagore,” he wrote, “le Magister dixit ne fut jamais admis en Physique.” This writer indignantly argued that it was not enough to be a well-known figure; instead, concrete evidence was needed for a scientific argument to be believed. He juxtaposed the ideas presented in the abbé’s work with a vision of how “les vrais physiciens” would present evidence: “toutes les personnes qui s’intéressent à la propagation des Sciences ne sauraient trop prémunir les Lecteurs faciles ou prévenus, contre une infinité d’assertions dénuées de preuves, & qui ne peuvent contribuer qu’a donner de fausses notions & a entretenir dans l’erreur.” Not only were true scientists considered responsible for presenting evidence for the sake of the scientific process, but also for the way the public would then interpret their findings. A number of letters on electricity—whether in the form of lightning, as medical treatment, or as the stimulus in an experiment—concerned themselves with how the

53 The references made by Jal de Muntel to the experiments in the Abbé Bertholon’s book are rather brief. It is not possible to discern the mechanisms for the experiments undertaken in the volume discussed.
54 Les Affiches du Dauphiné, September 10, 1784, 82-83.
public would make sense of electric forces. Such writers believed that they had a responsibility
to explain natural phenomena in a clear, coherent way that adhered to a cause and effect
relationship, because readers could be credulous and prone to irrationality.

Letters like that of Jal de Muntel served as reminders that many of the missives published
on electricity were preoccupied not only with the utility of the information conveyed, but also
with the products such letters publicized. While the letters in this sample were not explicit
advertisements, they nevertheless addressed the need for and the utility of goods in the
marketplace. The idea of implementing lightning rods required the manufacture and installation
of such an apparatus. The letter written by the owner of the cabinet électrique campaigned for
the expansion of services—like the ones that he provided—throughout the city. And Jal de
Muntel’s letter that took to task the author of a book of electrical experiments was, more
generally, a critique of the value of a product.

Electricity was a point of interest in the letters that characterized the optimism of the age,
by which electricity was transported from the hands of nature to the hands of men, as one of the
letters put it. Such power could be channeled, mitigating the damage and uncertainty with which
it had previously rendered the countryside. Rather than leaving it at that, though, scientists and
tinkerers looked for ways to better understand electricity, and to put it to use in hot air balloons
and in health remedies. This preoccupation with utility was evident in many of these letters,
where knowing how things worked was not enough—information needed to benefit humanity.
Furthermore, electrical experiments became a way for amateur tinkerers to understand for
themselves: the man who shocked his cat to cure her epilepsy, the man and his friends who set
up an experimental chamber to electrify one another, and the critic who found the Abbé
Bertholon’s collection of experiments too impossible to be believed. In all of these letters, the
writers were preoccupied with figuring out how things worked, and making sure that information was shared so that their fellow readers could test their findings. To their credit, the principle of replicable findings remains essential to a good experiment today. The scale of change that their letters anticipated was more modest than that of their contemporaries who wrote on ballooning. Rather than such an achievement being simply a matter of man triumphing over nature, harnessing electricity was put to use in all of the letters on this topic. Whether by grounding lightning through rods that protected churches, businesses, and homes, or by using electric currents as a medical treatment, the shared impulse in such letters was to improve the conditions of daily life. Such a preoccupation with utility fit coherently within the larger rhetorical structure of letters on science and medicine published between 1770-1788.

PROVINCIAL MEDICINE

The letters covered a range of subjects, with only a few letters on any one medical issue or ailment. The majority of such contributions were designed to provide medical advice to those without a doctor nearby. One contributor aptly explained the role of the provincial press in disseminating practical knowledge on health: "c'est surtout aux hommes confinés à la campagne, loin de toute communication directe avec des savants, que l'on doit pardonner de chercher quelquefois de l'instruction par la voie des Journaux." Much in the way that Samuel-Auguste Tissot’s publication, Avis au peuple sur sa santé, was designed to provide some practical advice to rural inhabitants who could not reach a doctor, the provincial affiches provided readers access to possible remedies for common illnesses.

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55 Les Affiches de Troyes, October 29, 1783, 178.
The provincial affiches under study in this chapter regularly conveyed information from their readers on scientific and medical topics. Such newspapers were often preoccupied with incremental changes that might improve one’s condition, especially in cases of medical cures. Roy Porter’s study of The Gentlemen’s Magazine, a contemporary British periodical similar in form and content to the periodicals in France, and Patrick Singy’s work on Tissot’s book for provincials without access (either geographic or financial) to a doctor’s care, both emphasize that such publications preoccupied themselves with remedies for conditions that could be ameliorated.57 Provincial publications did not suggest treatments for dangerous epidemics, because the authors were certain that there was nothing that could be done for the patients in such circumstances. Instead, they focused their attention on more minor illnesses that could be treated. The same was generally true for the provincial affiches’ letters on health and medicine, which preoccupied themselves with practical, measured solutions to common illnesses and discomforts.

A brief overview of the letters reveals that they covered a range of medical illnesses that preoccupied the public (See Table 3.1).

The most common illnesses were maladies of the chest, throat, eyes, and ears, many of which may well have been caused by the common cold; letters concerning such ailments often included remedies that would ameliorate the symptoms. Rather fewer letters dealt with medical conditions that were seen as either incurable or in need of a doctor’s supervision. In comparison to the approximately 25 letters on illnesses and their remedies, there was only one letter on an epidemic that plagued the countryside. A handful of missives concerned health problems that a rural population was especially likely to face, like treating bites by snakes or rabid animals, resuscitating victims of drowning or of bad air, or preventing the spread of the *maladie rouge*.
that attacked sheep and other livestock, especially in the Sologne. A subsection of the medicine-related letters concerned more dangerous health situations, where the risk of serious illness or death was higher, and the expertise of a doctor or surgeon was deemed more necessary. Letters on childbirth, inoculation, and surgeries fit within this category, and were almost exclusively penned by doctors and surgeons in the field. A final group of letters were concerned with explaining obscure illnesses, unusual symptoms, or medical terminology. Such letters suggest that provincial newspapers provided a space for practitioners to solicit one another’s feedback, to debate the meanings of terms, and the benefits of treatment. In this way, the affiches provided an interesting space where doctors, charlatans, and prospective patients all contributed ideas to a shared forum. Recipes for compresses to heal congestion, warning against charlatans peddling powders that did not work, reports on the best techniques for childbirth, and discussions of the meaning of a particular medical term were juxtaposed with one another.

Despite the tremendous diversity in the letters, they did share a general structure. While less explicit than the letters on ballooning and electricity about the nature of experimentation, the method adopted in discussions of medicine was usually one of empirical observation and treatment through trial and error. In general, the content was less explicitly laid out as an experiment, although some letter writers were more forthcoming in this regard. For instance, one anonymous contributor emphasized the benefits of smallpox inoculation in an effort to silence critics and doubters who believed it was dangerous. He countered the arguments that inoculating the public would make the illness more lethal or render them more susceptible to other illnesses. To prove his argument, he had conducted a natural experiment in Montpellier.

58 For a description of *maladie rouge*, see "Maladie Rouge," in *Dictionnaire d’histoire naturelle, appliquée aux arts, a l’agriculture, à l’économie rurale et domestique, à la médecine, etc.*, Par une société de naturalistes et d'agriculteurs, ed. Deterville (Rue de la Harpe, à Paris: Abel Lanoe, 1818).
He inoculated the fauxbourgs of Montpellier, and he then tracked the number of instances of smallpox in Montpellier, Sommieres, and Nîmes. In the city where he had inoculated the population, he found that the instances of illness were less frequent, and the cases of that did occur were milder. Not all letters adopted this structure of conveying the results of an experiment, perhaps in part because the aims of writers on the topic of health varied much more than in the letters concerning electricity or ballooning. For instance, while some sought to convey a remedy, others instead preferred to debate optimal treatments, to document the spread of an illness, or to solicit feedback from fellow readers. Nevertheless, letters often concluded with an explanation of the individuals for whom the proposed treatment had proved effective.

The contributors of such letters may be grouped into two categories, both by the subject matter that they addressed, and by the expertise of the writer. There was a clear division between laymen and doctors. The public seems to have recognized this distinction, since it was only doctors who contributed to debates on childbirth, surgery, amputation, and medical terminology. For example, the letters on childbirth emphasized the importance of extensive training by referencing particular texts on the subject and citing specific doctors, and doctors or chirurgien-accoucheurs wrote all of them. In Poitiers, the affiches printed a letter publishing the names of the graduates from a local doctor’s courses on improving care during childbirth. In 1783, 25 students graduated, of whom 14 were women, and in 1784, 23 graduated, of whom 13 were men. The students in question tended to come form the généralité of Poitou, but some arrived from further afield, including Paris. Upon their graduation, the alumni received two books to help them in their practice, La Maîtresse Accoucheuse and Angélique du Coudray’s

59 Les Affiches de Toulouse, September 15, 1784, 150.
60 Chirurgiens were trained practitioners, although they were not doctors (médecins). Doctors were trained to evaluate the patient. The chirurgien would then carry out the diagnosis, i.e. bleeding. Chirurgiens were seen as inferior to the more elite médecins.
Du Coudray taught extensively throughout France, introducing the first anatomically correct obstetric mannequin, which allowed students to practice delivering babies.\textsuperscript{61} The doctor publicizing his training courses in childbirth suggested that perhaps the intendant could support his students’ stay in Poitiers while they were enrolled in the course, or that the seigneur and curé from a students’ home town could find the resources to support their costs so that more midwives and surgeons might be trained. The letter concluded with an appeal to the ultimate goal of such training programs, “il ne faut pas se lasser de le dire: aucun Établissement n’est plus intéressant pour l’humanité, que ceux qui ont ainsi pour objet la conservation des Citoyens.”\textsuperscript{62} This announcement served several purposes: it communicated to the public the names of trained professionals in childbirth. It also communicated to other experts the texts that formed the basis of the students’ training. Finally, it asked local notables to support medical professionalization.

The letter was also interesting for its reference to Madame du Coudray, whose emphasis on palpable instruction fit coherently within the tradition of sensible science that Jessica Riskin has delineated.\textsuperscript{63} Jessica Riskin’s work has suggested that people were preoccupied with visual, sensible demonstrations, not because the public was universally awestruck by balloons or charlatans. Instead, a “sensible epistemology” was the guiding force behind scientific inquiry in the eighteenth century. This rested on the premise, forwarded by Locke and other scientist philosophers that experience was the source of knowledge.\textsuperscript{64} That is, facts had to be seen and felt in the material world in order to demonstrate their validity. In this way, the case of Mesmer

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\textsuperscript{61} Nina Rattner Gelbart, \textit{The King’s Midwife: a History and Mystery of Madame du Coudray} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

\textsuperscript{62} Affiches du Poitou, May 6, 1784, 73-74.


\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Science in the Age of Sensibility: the Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment}. 150
was an outgrowth of this form of scientific thought, not a challenge to scientific thought. The letters to the editor included letters from Mesmer and his followers; evaluating them alongside other medical cures may shed light on the way his ideas were received by a reading public searching for health improvements.

Understanding how the literate individual in 18th century France made sense of scientific and medical innovation—both spectacular and mundane, remains a significant question for historians. Learned men at the time certainly struggled to distinguish different forms of knowledge. Oliver Hochadel has shown how the concept of the natural philosopher was still in flux at this period—expertise was a hard thing to determine, especially when the markers between membership in an elite Académie and working as a scientific tinkerer or salesmen were as much functions of one’s class as one’s knowledge. Riskin’s analysis of the Mesmer investigation shows the innovative and scientifically sound techniques—use of a placebo, and double-blind review—employed by two independent panels to reach the conclusion that Mesmer’s magnetic fluid did not exist. However, lacking any other causal explanation for the effects experienced by some of his patients, they attributed the cause to another unseen, immeasurable substance: too much imagination in some of the patients. In a similar vein, E. C. Spary’s recent book has explored the understanding and evolution of expertise in the 18th century

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65 Ibid; Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*.  

through the lens of food. There are similar phenomena at play in the letters to the editor—letters by well-known scientists: astronomers, chemists, and physicists, were juxtaposed with letters from tinkerers, scientific salesmen, and witnesses to medical cures. Could the reader parse the differences between the two? Considering the challenges faced by learned men in the Mesmer investigation, it seems rather doubtful that the average reader would be able to distinguish the validity of a doctor’s claims from that of a convincing amateur. After all, doctors were not necessarily more successful than local practitioners in healing their patients. Both the conceptualization of sensible science, and limitations of medical knowledge, made discerning the best person to treat one’s illness an ongoing question.

A letter from a chirurgien-accoucheur named Tarbés concerning the blood loss that one of his patients had faced in childbirth serves as an example of the limits of expert knowledge. His letter concerned a comparison of his own experience with the recommendations in a well-regarded medical text. Tarbés emphasized the tenuous situation in which the mother and baby found themselves, “comme les Accouchements sont la partie la plus essentielle de l’art de guérir, puisque d’un seul coup de main on peut sauver la mère & l’enfant, je pense que vous recevrez avec plaisir l’observation suivante.” He wrote that he helped a woman deliver her baby, and the baby was healthy. A few hours later, the mother passed a blood clot the size of a baby’s head. The doctor had referred to the medical text, Accouchements de Smellie for direction, but he did not think the suggested treatment of a teinture thébaïque was advisable, since it would just make the patient bleed more. Instead, he suggested that the mother be allowed to pass the clot on her own, and if she were too weak to do so, he would do an extraction after several hours of observation. Monsieur Tarbés further asserted that he had witnessed the treatment that he now

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70 In particular, he referred to tome 3, page 509 of Accouchements de Smellie.
practiced at a course by Mr. Lebas in Paris, where poorer women came to have their babies delivered by the students. Like the previous letter about the school in Poitiers, this letter ended with a call for more training: “Le bien de l’humanité exigerait de pareils établissements dans toutes les grandes Villes. Heureux ceux qui les verront! & plus heureux encore ceux qui les formeront!”

A third letter on the topic of childbirth also emphasized the importance of a doctor’s presence at the childbed, even in the case of successful deliveries, like the triplets born to a “féconde mère, âgée de 42 ans environ.” The letter mentioned the symptoms and the movements that led the mother and the doctor to suspect she was carrying multiple babies. M. Serdaz, chirurgien-accoucheur, from Saint-Marcellin near Grenoble, had supervised her pregnancy. His advice on “les doux exercices, la saignée, les lavements, & les secours diététiques,” left the writer confident that he, “n’ont pas peu contribué à son heureuse délivrance.” In all three letters on childbirth discussed, the writers placed emphasis on the importance of having a midwife or surgeon to deliver the baby, citing the doctors and sources of authority on the subject by name. Furthermore, they called on the community at large to support professional training throughout the provinces.

While the letters on childbirth advocated the need for a professional to aid in the dangerous process of delivery, the majority of letters on health instead adopted a do-it-yourself model of treatment. Such letters covered a range of content, identifying illnesses and suggesting remedies; they were authored by a more motley group: anonymous writers, amateurs, and some doctors. It seems that on such topics, the amount of exchange between writers was greater, and the individuals who were seen as qualified to submit their opinions were more diverse.

71 Affiches de Toulouse, January 21, 1784, 13-14.
72 Les Affiches du Dauphiné, May 28, 1784, 16-17.
throat, eye, and ear illnesses predominated the letters on health and medicine. As Roy Porter has noted concerning the British press at the same time, such topics dominated the discussion of health, because they were illnesses where a cure—or at least amelioration of the patient’s condition—was possible.\(^73\) In the provincial affiches, most of the letters on such illnesses consisted of a brief description of the symptoms, followed by a detailed recipe for a remedy. Such letters were often reprinted throughout the countryside by other affiches. The remedies were usually herbal mixtures that were either applied as a compress or taken orally. In the case of illnesses of the eye, compresses were the most frequent suggestions for treatment. A letter written by the Abbé Tessier to the editor of the *Journal général de France* was reprinted in the affiches of Grenoble and Poitiers. Tessier’s remedy was designed to treat the eyelids, which, by age, smallpox, or some other illness had lost their strength. He assured his readers that the treatment he suggested had no side effects, like other astringents and spirituous waters that caused inflammation and discomfort. His recipe consisted of a pinch of seventeen herbs native to his region, which were then mixed with whey, though some modifications to the recipe were acceptable.\(^74\) For instance, if whey were unavailable, milk could be substituted, although he recommended the former. As for the herbs, “quand on ne peut se procurer de toutes ces plantes, qui ont beaucoup de rapport entre elles par leurs propriétés, on en emploie un peu plus de celles qu’on a à sa portée.” Once the mixture had been distilled on low heat, it would reduce to a liqueur that could be kept in well-sealed bottles. The mixture should then be applied by

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\(^73\) Porter, "Lay Medical Knowledge in the Eighteenth Century: The Evidence of the *Gentleman's Magazine*.”

\(^74\) “On prend une poignée des feuilles de chacune des plantes suivantes : sauge, angélique de jardin, absinthe grande ou petite, sarriette annuelle ou vivace, fenouil, hysope, mélisse, basilic grand ou petit, rhue, thym, marjolaine, romarin, origan, calament, serpolet & une poignée de fleurs de lavande.” See *les Affiches du Dauphiné*, October 22, 1784, 108; *les Affiches du Poitou*, November 11, 1784, 150.
compress “sur les yeux fermés,” Tessier added, “qu’on y laisse au moins pendant la nuit.” He ended his letter with a disclosure that the remedy’s effectiveness might vary; his recipe had worked for many people, but it may not work on everyone, or on all eye illnesses.

Letters on respiratory illness commonly followed a similar model. One particularly popular letter on a treatment for lung ailments by a Carmelite monk named F. G. Blouet appeared in at least three provincial affiches. Citing the popularity of this remedy in Breton towns like Lorient, Guingamp, and Morlaix, the writer urged the editors to share the recipe with their readers. It consisted of two bunches of the herb rue, boiled in five pints of river water until it had reduced by half. After combining the reduction with a half-ounce of aloe, the mixture was to be applied to a towel and allowed to dry. The compress was then placed on the chest. Blouet recommended that his fellow readers prepare two towels, so that they could alternate the invalid’s compress, allowing one to dry while the other was in use. The towels would last six months, which Blouet assured his readers was the same amount of time it would take for the remedy to take effect in the consumptive. Like most other letters suggesting a remedy, this letter ended with a case where the compress had proven effective: “La femme de chambre d’une Dame de ma connaissance, qui était dans le plus triste état, & regardée comme sans ressource par tous les gens de l’art, jouit de la meilleure santé.”

Likewise, an anonymous letter appearing in the Affiches de Poitou adopted the same general format to introduce his own remedy for chest colds. The writer was quick to point out his lack of credentials: “Je ne suis, M., ni Médecin, ni Chirurgien, ni Apothicaire, encore suis-je moins empirique, mais seulement ami de l’humanité.” As a friend of humanity, he argued that

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75 Ibid.
76 The lung malady was likely tuberculosis.
his only goal was to get the word out about a useful remedy, just as “tout Citoyen doit y contribuer autant qu’il lui est possible.” Having witnessed the fifteen consumptives who had been restored to good health by this product, he asked that the paper share the remedy. Unlike the herbal compresses described thus far, this recipe called for more exotic products: “Prenez deux onces de racine liquide de nulla-campana, deux dragmes fleur de souffre, une dragme safran oriental mis en poudre, deux dragmes quinquina mis en poudre, demi-dragme iris de Florence, demi once baume de Copahu.” Most of the ingredients in the recipe were rather rare, especially the quinquina powder and the Copahu balm, both of which were from plants indigenous to South America. These expensive powders were then mixed in maidenhair fern syrup so that they would form an opiate to be taken each morning with chicken bouillon. (The chicken bouillon was to be boiled for a minute with lierre terrestre and maidenhair fern before the consumptive took the mixture.) The writer concluded his letter with another declaration that he had no part in the recipe, which he had copied word-for-word from a doctor in Montpellier “dont le nom m’a échappé.” Indeed, his only goal was “que ce Remède ait la confiance qu’il mérite : l’usage seul peut confirmer ce que j’avance.”

Letters on medicine suggested that those seeking medical advice in the forum of the letters to the editor were entering a marketplace of ideas of sorts. The structure of dialogue and debate within such contributions posited the effectiveness of a range of remedies, some of which required the patient-consumer to purchase a rare good. Some treatments consisted of mysterious products, like the author who maintained he had cured more than twenty people last year who suffered from fever, by mixing a cup of coffee with “une cuillerée d’Elixir de vie.”

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letter mentioned the importance of saffron in a remedy for a chest cold. At the same time, such newspapers were embedded in a commercial system. Colin Jones has argued that provincial newspapers offer a unique window into the lives of the literate public. Part of what he thinks made them such a unique, democratic, interesting space was that the readers were all consumers, partaking in a marketplace of goods and ideas through the newspaper. The preoccupation with innovation in medicine and science matched the public interest in ideas that were undoubtedly trendy, but these topics also demonstrated a utility by making goods and services available to the public. Whether or not such letters were intended as scams to drive up demand for a good sold by the anonymous writer remains unknown, but it seems possible that some of the remedies were designed to sell a product more than they were to cure patients. Indeed, some letters were thinly veiled ads designed to pique the reader’s interest, but they never divulged the details of the remedy. One such letter in les Affiches du Poitou suggested a non-surgical treatment for cataracts, but the author never delineated the details of the cure. Instead, he disparaged “les Charlatans de toute espèce,” who marketed their wares to a credible public; in many instances, he argued, such products did more harm than good, leaving “plus de victimes dans trois mois, que la guerre la plus sanglante en un an.” Following a charlatan’s medical advice could be expensive and deadly, but it is unclear how a reader was to parse the more convincing charlatan’s letter from sound medical advice. Letters sometimes appeared in the newspapers warning the public of products that were utterly inefficacious, like the letter that appeared in the Affiches d’Orléans denouncing a charlatan’s powder called la suprême. Nevertheless, similar

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79 Ibid., September 4, 1783, 141-142.
80 Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution."
81 Les Affiches du Poitou, September 23, 1784, 154.
82 Les Affiches d’Orléanais, October 1, 1784, 177-178.
structures of the letters, the similarities in ingredients, and the popularity of certain forms of remedies make it rather unclear how the reader without medical training—or even with medical training—might distinguish them. Indeed, the distinction between the care of a médecin and that of a charlatan is very unclear. Doctor’s remedies were not proven to be any more efficacious than the efforts of practitioners throughout France who operated in their local community as healers without university training.

To be sure, the letters that appeared in the provincial newspapers were, in general, more discrete than the posters that itinerant quacks circulated at the time. As Mathew Ramsey’s research has demonstrated, such posters made much grander claims about the power of their secret elixirs, which could cure everything from eye problems, stones, scurvy, dropsy, hernias, to scrofula. Furthermore, the format that such publications took was rather formulaic: the charlatan was always an outsider who had lived abroad to gain familiarity with illness and exotic cures, and he was traveling through the town to share his knowledge; the body of the poster described the remedies that he could cure; and the announcement closed with a list of successful cures or testimonials. Nearly all such individuals also claimed some association with official medicine, or the possession of some government approbation (which was usually a ploy to avoid local investigation). Furthermore, the posters never revealed the composition of the remedies.83

Such posters differed from the letters to the editor in a few key ways: first, the claims that letter writers made were much more modest and specific. The writer was usually a resident of the province in which the letter was published, not an outsider; and he almost always shared every detail of his remedies, down to the proportions of ingredients, the details of their preparation, and

their application to the patient. What is more, Ramsey has argued that the work of traveling charlatans was obvious to the educated observer at the time: the grammar was poor, they were disorganized, the tone was exaggerated, and they contained redundancies, i.e. referring to the same ailment by multiple names.\textsuperscript{84} Ramsey distinguished the group of traveling charlatans from a social group of sedentary empirics, who often had some medical or surgical credentials and were also prominent merchants. Such individuals were trying to turn a profit, so their discussions in publications, ads, and posters centered on soliciting patients and selling remedies. The public knew that the medical practice in which such empirics worked met an economic need for the practitioner. What the public also recognized was that medicine under the Ancien Régime was hierarchical in much the same way that guilds were: doctors were trained in urban centers, and they were part of and beholden to a corporate structure. Healers of various kinds outside of those structures lacked the urban, elite network that doctors possessed, and were instead connected to a local market.\textsuperscript{85} The healers that appeared in the provincial press fit this characterization well. The patient might well have distinguished the traveling charlatan, the sedentary empiric, and the doctor more by their class and connection to the community than by the effectiveness of their treatment. Indeed, the letters to the editor in 1783-1784 largely excluded the traveling quacks, and instead presented the more compelling letters of empirics from the local towns and doctors.

The extensive collection of letters in 1783-1784 on subjects related to health and medicine shared some traits with the letters on ballooning and electricity. They often adopted an


\textsuperscript{85} Professional and Popular Medicine in France, 1770-1830: the Social World of Medical Practice.
attitude of observation, experimentation, and debate. And they were penned by a mix of experts and amateurs who worked to take knowledge and apply it in new venues. The preoccupation with application and utility formed the foundation for nearly all the letters on the subject. In contrast to the previous two cases evaluated in this chapter, the scale of innovation was small. Incremental amelioration was the goal in most of the letters. There were no transformative medical breakthroughs, and letters shied away from reporting on medical problems like epidemics that were seen as unsolvable. Instead, the focus remained on more tenable, marginal improvements in care and treatment.

EXPERTISE

The question of expertise demands an evaluation of the individuals who composed the letters under study. Contributors on topics related to science and medicine differed from the general population of letter writers: they identified themselves more often than the average letter writer, who identified him or herself a little over half of the time (64% of the letters on ballooning; 78% of letters on electricity; and 51% of the letters on medicine were signed). Furthermore, with the exception of just one comtesse who contributed a letter on a local ballooning demonstration, men wrote all the signed letters. And educated practitioners figured prominently within this group. While the letter writers tended to represent a more elite population, the audience that they referenced as their readership varied considerably. In the case of the letters on hot-air balloons, for instance, one writer saw the new technology as universally relevant, “comme l’intérêt général que les expériences de la machine aérostatique ont inspiré à tous les ordres des citoyens.”86 In contrast to this rather ecumenical sense of the impact of ballooning, another contributor described his audience as being other “Savants illustrés” whom

86 Les Affiches du Dauphiné, December 19, 1783, 139.
he urged to “faciliter & perfectionner cette sublime découverte.” These two illustrations taken from the same newspaper indicate that many such contributors imagined rather different audiences would read their contributions than the prosopography of letter writers has suggested.

The attention that the balloonists received in the letters to the editor may well have come from nascent concepts in the eighteenth century that transformed notions of success and of social recognition. Recent work by Antoine Lilti has argued that celebrity differed from the older concepts of glory, which rested on collective admiration or commemoration and was reserved for *grands hommes* like military heroes; or of reputation, which depended on evaluation by one’s peers within one’s circles of sociability. Instead, as a result of material culture shaped by the press and by commercial culture, celebrity both expanded the circle of recognition and depersonalized the celebrity’s relationship and knowledge of the public. The concept of *célébrité* articulated by Lilti fits best with the letters explored here concerning balloonomania.

The same names appeared repeatedly in the letters on ballons aérostatiques: the Montgolfier brothers, the Robert brothers, and Pîlatre de Rozier were often identified by name in the descriptions of ballooning and credited with piloting a particular balloon, or reaching a new breakthrough first. Such characterizations of the early aeronauts were made by an adoring public: “l’âme encore toute échauffée des sublimes experiences de MM. Montgolfier & Charles, & l’esprit étonné du courage éclairé des quatre voyageurs aériens.” The enlightened courage of the balloonists inspired onlookers and spurred further experiments by imitators throughout France. Letters concerning electricity and medicine identified celebrated practitioners less frequently. On the subject of electricity, celebrities appeared only occasionally. For instance,

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87 Ibid., September 19, 1783, 85-86.
89 *Les Affiches du Dauphiné*, December 19, 1783, 139.
Benjamin Franklin was referenced as the inventor of the lightning rod. As for the letters concerning medicine, the only well-known figures mentioned were the ones who wrote books cited in the letters, like Angélique du Coudray and Samuel-Auguste Tissot. Such figures did not appear as actors in the letters, nor as their authors.

To be sure, letters on subjects related to science and medicine tended to favor elites, but they were not the only voices. Amateurs, tinkerers, and salesmen were prominent in such letters as well. As this chapter’s three case studies have demonstrated, amateurs took part in debates. They were often forthright in their lack of professional training, but they couched their authority on a subject in their extensive experience. Confident that their methods had yielded the desired results, they submitted their findings on electrical currents and medicinal remedies. Furthermore, they asked their fellow readers to repeat their experiments and to write back about whether they found the same results. Writers on the topic of electricity were rather straightforward about what their credentials were, but they also intimated that credentials were not most important. Instead, experience was crucial—demonstrating that they had done the experiment themselves, and that they had clear findings. They characterized themselves with certain habits of mind—as rational observers, as investigators into natural principles. They also juxtaposed themselves with the image of the credulous (and often rural) public, who might misunderstand scientific phenomena or who might believe an erroneous publication. Expertise did not matter as much as experience and adherence to the scientific method. Nevertheless, there were limits made clear by occasional references to the need for regulation of knowledge by members of royal faculties on related subjects. ⁹⁰ Such letters were emblematic of the social hierarchies within which letter writers moved.

The nature of knowledge in the eighteenth century makes clear that even the terms “expert” and “amateur” were imprecise descriptors for men and women engaged in scientific and medical projects in the last decades of the Old Regime. For the most part, expertise was a marker of a university education—a product of one’s social and economic status. The term “amateur,” enveloped a number of meanings: an amateur might lack university training, but may have read and worked widely in a field of inquiry nonetheless. Indeed, an amateur might be best understood as a lover of knowledge: a tinkerer or practitioner who relied on experience for his education. For the most part, the letters penned by amateurs to their local papers reflected their earnest desire to figure things out: to share their observations and to debate their fellow readers. While their levels of knowledge certainly varied, such writers were only occasionally charlatans out to dupe readers or make easy money. Instead, the majority of letters by amateurs fit the profile Ramsey has presented of local empirics, who were rooted within a community, and who were earnest in their efforts to aid the public.

CONCLUSION

The letters on popular science and medicine shared observations, suggested improvements, and reported their result. The notion of a collective working through ideas and experiments together drew the reader into a shared virtual process of discovery. At least in part, such an exchange seems to have flourished because of the lack of definitive answers that were put forward in such letters. The example of the consternated doctor who was so incensed by those who disparaged the effectiveness of inoculations shows that individuals were often moved to write in opposition to rumors and lack of consensus. The letters related to science and health were part of a debate that thrived in part because the reading public did not know the answers.
Such a space for lively dialogue amongst letter writers functioned in ways other than purely scientific ones. The letters were a source of entertainment; scientific spectacles displayed for the reader and debated by other letters provided an ongoing back-and-forth that the reader could track over time. Such debates also enabled those with commercial interests to pinpoint spaces where their products might be marketed. For example, the man demonstrating his walking-on-water shoes opened his letter with a discussion of aerostats to draw his reader in, and then he pitched his own idea. Occasional letters advertising or warning against secret elixirs or powders read like potential ads for goods.

It seems that the lack of consensus about which scientific protocols and medical remedies worked and which did not work in the letters left readers to discern the truth for themselves. Clearly, readers could learn to distinguish the letters from well-known, trained practitioners from those of self-declared amateurs, since the majority of the contributions on such subjects were signed. The extent to which the reader could then equate the individual’s social position to their expertise remains a more difficult question. Based on the certainty with which a number of amateurs articulated their own legitimacy based on their experience of having conducted experiments themselves, it is likely that the reader would have difficulty delineating the words of a well-informed amateur from a convincing merchant or charlatan. The affiches functioned as a marketplace within which ideas supported by merchants, amateurs, and trained practitioners circulated. The juxtaposition of their voices and the rhetorical strategies that they employed thrived on debate and uncertainty, encouraging fellow readers to take an active role in the scientific process and to report back with their own findings. Such contributions were suggestive of a culture of popular science and medicine that thrived on the inspiration of scientific innovation, and were adopted by readers interested in the incremental amelioration of daily life.
Chapter 4
To Write that the Public may Act: Bienfaisance, Charity, and the Public Good

Bienfaisance (Morale), C’est une vertu qui nous porte à notre prochain. Elle est la fille de la bienveillance et de l’amour de l’humanité.

INTRODUCTION

In 1777, the Affiches du Poitou published a letter from one of their readers that chronicled a wedding. The bride, the groom, and their families, all of whom were fermiers, invited “tous les pauvres de la contrée” to partake in the wedding festivities. Such “charité compatissante de ces deux familles était connue,” so it was little surprise to the community that they would include the poor in their celebration. They invited the peasants to the church for the wedding ceremony, and then they went together to the village, where the couple distributed “un morceau du pain du pieds de trois livres,” to each person in equal portion, so that “aucun ne fût oublié, pour qu’aucun n’eût la portion d’un autre.” The anonymous writer praised the contributions made by the bride and grooms’ families, specifying not only how much they gave but also why they gave: “plus accoutumés que nous à voir de leurs semblables dans le besoin, faisaient cette aumône avec plus de sensibilité que nous n’en aurions peut-être nous-mêmes en pareil cas.” This letter underscores two themes prevalent in the discourse on social welfare at the time: first, that the actors saw the poor as their fellow man, “leurs semblables”, and second that they acted out of “sensibilité” to the condition of the poor. At the dinner and dancing that followed, some 138 guests and 120 peasants gathered to celebrate with the bridal couple. The writer exclaimed, “O sainte humanité!” upon witnessing the nuptial feast, where he saw “l’homme aimer & soulager son semblables, ou j’ai vu briller dans son plus beau jour cette vertu qui rapproche l’homme de son auteur.”

1 Supplément à l’Encyclopédie. i, Amsterdam, 1776, 888, cited in Jones, Charity and Bienfaisance: the Treatment of the Poor in the Montpellier Region, 1740-1815.
intermixing of religious and secular language was characteristic of the social welfare discourse at this time. The letter concluded with a call to his fellow readers: “Habitants des villes, recevez un grand exemple & admirez!” In short, the writer anticipated that this testimony might serve as a source of motivation to his fellow readers who might in turn emulate such a “bonne oeuvre.”² The use of religious language to describe beneficent action linked this trait de bienfaisance to a longer tradition of charitable giving.

This vignette conveys a central theme of many Enlightenment writers: the idea of progress—the belief in the possibility of improving the condition of humanity in the world. Such notions were couched in terms of public virtue drawn from antiquity and articulated by prominent writers of the day.³ Participation in social welfare projects was seen as a way of expressing public virtue through works done for the benefit of the community. Indeed, such philanthropic acts provide an illustration of the more practical working out of the Enlightenment—of finding practical solutions to the difficulties of daily life, and of having a sense of confidence that solutions could be found and implemented. By evaluating not only the acts themselves, but also the motivations behind them, a study of the efforts to improve humanity allows for an exploration of why people engaged in philanthropic work. Much of the historiography on this topic—on charity and bienfaisance—has suggested a rather defined dichotomy between such motivations; whether such a distinction was made in the writings of literate eighteenth century Parisians engaged in such philanthropic work is the question posed by this chapter. Letters to the editor provided one lens for examining changing sentiments by exploring how members of a more expansive reading public made sense of the current events

² Les Affiches du Poitou, March 20, 1777, 46.
within their city, and how they sought to change their social environment. Indeed, imagining a completely new society, like the one that the Revolution would create, was impossible. Nevertheless, public service undertaken spontaneously by readers lends important insight into the ways individuals sought to enact change beyond the auspices of Old Regime institutions, both through written critique and organized action.

By examining letters published in the first Parisian daily, *le Journal de Paris*, and five provincial affiches that report and call for social reform, this chapter explores how members of the reading public grappled with the changing world in which they lived. As Chapter 2 has demonstrated, it was rather common for readers throughout France to have access to multiple papers, and for the content of such newspapers to overlap. As a result, evaluating the six newspapers in this chapter together allows for a better sense of the shared discourses and strategies through which Old Regime beneficence was understood. The letters furnished not only a form of social critique, but also a means by which individuals mobilized their fellow readers to build a better society. Letters to the editor do not suggest a singular, coherent program shared by all of the public, per se, but they do allow for an understanding of general trends and patterns in the way people thought about and debated their concerns for social welfare. As a way of mapping the attitudes held by the newspapers’ readers, the present study analyzes a series of related themes touched on in the letters. It first treats the evolution of the concept of bienfaisance from 1777-1787, analyzing major changes and predominant modes of writing about philanthropic work. It also provides profiles of prominent social groups who wrote on the topic, and evaluates the range of approaches taken by such writers. Finally, the study reflects on the connection between the writers’ discussions of improving humanity and their understanding of the religious and the secular in their daily life at a moment when the role of the individual, the
state, and the Church were all being reinterpreted.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Most previous studies of this beneficence have stipulated a sharp dichotomy between charity on the one hand and bienfaisance on the other. Colin Jones has treated the distinction between these two forms of eighteenth century social welfare in detail. He emphasized that acts of Christian charity tended to be “donor-oriented,” “unresponsive to changing social circumstances,” and “not attuned to discriminating between ‘deserving and ‘undeserving’ cases of poverty.” In Jones’ view bienfaisance entailed an implicit attack on the Church’s dominance of social welfare and an attempt to shift the emphasis from the spiritual to the material needs of the poor; bienfaisance “was a rational and methodical activity which sought an appropriate response to suffering as circumstances required, and exuded a reassuring pragmatism.” Such a delineation between the two philanthropic projects makes clear the critiques posited by the philosophes, but it also obscures the way that the practitioners of charity and bienfaisance actually conceived of their efforts.

Jones, Cissie Fairchilds, Jean-Pierre Gutton, and Katherine Norberg have all examined the organization of charity and poor relief in specific provincial cities, focusing primarily on urban or rural institutions, especially hospitals, or on the largely quantitative analysis of legal documents. Michel Vovelle, for his part, has used the language in wills in eighteenth century Provence to assess the evolution of public sentiment about social welfare.

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4 Jones, Charity and Bienfaisance: the Treatment of the Poor in the Montpellier Region, 1740-1815, 3.
5 Charity and Bienfaisance: the Treatment of the Poor in the Montpellier Region, 1740-1815, 2.
6 Cissie Fairchilds, Jean-Pierre Gutton, and Kathryn Norberg have turned their attention to this kind of institutional approach in their regional studies of Aix-en-Provence, Lyon, and Grenoble. See Cissie C. Fairchilds, Poverty and charity in Aix-en-Provence, 1640-1789, Johns Hopkins University studies in historical and political science 94th ser., no. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins
The present study develops a somewhat different approach: to trace the evolution of attitudes toward social welfare, and the deployment of the language of charity and bienfaisance as evidenced in letters to the editor. The sources are *le Journal de Paris*, which took an especial interest in beneficent causes, and the affiches of Angers, Grenoble, Metz, Orléans, and Poitiers. All six of the papers were published from 1777 through 1788, which allows for a comparative analysis of the content of the letters to the editor in these six sites.

Past studies of social welfare through the pre-Revolutionary press remain rather limited. In her evaluation of *le Journal de Paris*, Catherine Duprat treated the substance of the letters on philanthropy, especially articulations of bienfaisance, in a general way. She dismissed the early period of the *Journal*, noting that while it exhibited the birth of interest in philanthropic work, it did not lead to a clearly defined program for social action—the focal point of her study. She has pointed to the winter of 1783-84, especially during the early months of 1784, as a critical turning point in the paper’s coverage of bienfaisance, a period in which the paper was printing, on average, two discussions of philanthropy a week. She speculated that perhaps the difficult winter was instrumental in bringing readers’ attention the need for involvement in beneficent projects. Thereafter, in the period from 1784-89, she charted an increased and sustained interest in the question. But overall, Duprat’s project remained more interested in explaining how


7 Duprat, "Pour l'amour de l'humanité" : le temps des philanthropes : la philanthropie parisienne des lumières à la monarchie de Juillet; ibid.

8 Ibid.
philanthropic efforts changed over the course of a century. She looked for certain institutions and particular approaches to social work within the *Journal*, but her treatment remained brief.

Treating a longer span of the six newspapers makes possible a more systematic evaluation of the way articulations for the improvement of humanity were developed and deployed through writer’s letters. It further seeks to trace the origins of the sense of bienfaisance that is so clearly articulated by the late 1780s—how did readers first come to understand social welfare as a subject that should be of interest to them? What were their motivations in doing philanthropic work? Did traditional Christian piety continue to play a role? How did they express these ideas to the public? And were such modes of expression shared by readers?

**METHODOLOGY**

In order to broach these questions, a sampling technique was employed that focuses on the nearly 1,200 letters published in the six papers during the years 1777, 1781, and 1787. Such an approach allows for an assessment of both change and continuity in the eighteenth century French press over the last decade of the Old Regime.

Quantitative analysis throws the differences between the first Parisian daily and its provincial contemporaries into sharp relief. In fact, the number of letters on all subjects published in *le Journal de Paris* for the three sample years far outnumbered those published in the provincial papers. Indeed, nearly 1,000 letters to the editor appeared in the Parisian journal in 1777, 1781, and 1787, while the total for the five provincial presses published was somewhat over 200 letters. As Table 4.1 demonstrates, the total number of letters published increased over time, with the largest shift between 1777 and 1781. The increase in total letters between 1781 and 1787 was more modest by comparison:
Table 4.1: Total Number of Letters Published in Six Newspapers on all Subjects, 1777, 1781, and 1787
(Newspapers are listed by their city of publication.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper (listed by city of publication)</th>
<th>1777</th>
<th>1781</th>
<th>1787</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angers</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grenoble</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metz</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orléans</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poitiers</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>362</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>1194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2: Total Number of Letters Published in Six Newspapers on Beneficence, 1777, 1781, and 1787
(Newspapers are listed by their city of publication.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper (listed by city of publication)</th>
<th>1777</th>
<th>1781</th>
<th>1787</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grenoble</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metz</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orléans</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poitiers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1 also reveals the variation in publication habits among the six newspapers under study. While the number of letters increased over time in general, only *Les Affiches du Dauphiné* adheres to this trend of continually increasing its publication rates. In Angers and Poitiers, the publication rates dipped in 1781 before increasing to their highest point in 1787. In contrast, in Metz and Paris the number of letters published peaked in 1781 before declining in 1787. *Les Affiches d’Orléanais* published the least letters overall, with just 12 contributions over three years, half of which appeared in 1777. As one might well anticipate, the total number of letters
on beneficence in the provincial affiches was much lower than in the Parisian press. In all, 15 letters, or about 7% of the content of letters to the editor in provincial newspapers addressed such topics. Despite the more modest nature of contributions in the provincial affiches, an analysis of the Parisian and provincial press in tandem serves to highlight themes that the papers shared.

By comparison to the Parisian daily, the affiches were much less likely to print letters on bienfaisant topics. In 1777, three of the 43 published in the five affiches covered beneficent acts. In 1781, the number of letters on bienfaisance was five of 78, and in 1787, the number of letters on social welfare was seven of 95 letters. The letters in 1777 and 1781 tended to emphasize the traits of the model bienfaiteur or bienfaitrice, with references to his or her character—as a sensitive soul, moved by witnessing the hardship of their fellow man, “leur semblable”. Letters for this period also related traits de bienfaisance performed by people of various estates—nobles, doctors and intendants, but also peasants. Emphasis was placed on virtue and on being moved to improve others’ day-to-day condition. By 1787, letters also featured philanthropic institutions, especially schools for the blind, the deaf and mute, and foundling hospitals.

In Paris, the proportion of letters published on beneficent topics grew throughout the decade. In 1777, letters concerning charity and bienfaisance comprised just 4% of the total content in le Journal de Paris. At this point, the newspaper was most preoccupied with letters on the arts. By 1781, the proportion of letters on beneficence had grown to nearly 7%, and the letters had begun to take on similar contours by referencing the newspaper as a repository for stories of beneficent acts. In 1787, the number of letters on such topics had doubled, comprising 14% of the total content of published letters. Over time, the newspaper shifted from focusing almost entirely on the arts, especially belles lettres, the classics, and the opera, to an interest in the material situation of one’s fellow man. By the end of the Old Regime, letters that concerned
social welfare had become a key component of the newspaper’s content. Letters referencing the *Journal* as a repository of acts for the good of humanity had become an important component of the newspaper’s role.

Of further interest was the manner in which letter writers characterized themselves, and the way their social position may or may not have reflected a differentiation in their conceptualization of social reform. In what ways were differences of social status and gender reflected in the message that writers articulated about social welfare? Content analysis provides a basis to respond to these questions, and qualitative approaches allow for a more detailed evaluation of the letter as a particular kind of primary source.

A more qualitative evaluation, therefore, examines what the language and structure of the letters reveal about changing sentiments toward philanthropy by probing the evolution of rhetoric, imagery, and forms of argumentation, both religious and secular, in the language of the letters. The present study inquires whether letters followed particular models, or whether each writer employed a more personal style. Evaluating the voices of the authors, and the bases on which they exhorted others to participate in caring for humanity may provide valuable clues about the extent to which the reading public understood their philanthropic efforts as a religious or a secular act. Thus, a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches may provide a unique perspective from which to explore the religious sentiments and social investment of the French reading public in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

**BIENFATEURS IN OLD REGIME SOCIETY.**

The clergy traditionally held a predominant influence over social welfare under the Old Regime, and they acted as one of the most frequent contributors of published letters. While they rarely wrote about theology, their accounts publicized charitable acts within their local
community. In the letters written by curés, concerns for the material and spiritual condition of their parishioners were fused together as they called for financial support for social welfare projects, engaging their readers in the projects they had undertaken. Women were often active members and leaders of charitable societies, like the Marquise de M*** who converted her chateau’s kitchen into a hospital kitchen and pharmacy when an epidemic struck her neighbors. 9 Many of the letters written by women conveyed a more personal tone; they were particularly concerned with conveying demonstrated benefits witnessed by themselves and their families. The immediate benefit that they had experienced was conveyed as a public good, and in the process they praised the expertise of those who communicated practical, material results that had remedied their problems. For example, an anonymous woman wrote in to report on her husband’s successful treatment for chest pains and fever and to praise the good men who had helped him escape “des bras de la mort.”10 Doctors also wrote letters in which they offered not only their medical expertise, but also their concern about improving the lives of their fellow man. They contributed information on medical treatments and noted the efforts of local bienfaiteurs who helped the poor and infirm, exhorting readers to emulate their behavior. As one doctor put it, "tous les gens sont consacrés au service des malades," and he believed the examples of beneficent acts printed in the paper would be persuasive motivation for the readership.11 Finally, government officials like intendants wrote in to advocate for improvements within their community. For instance, a correspondent for the Société Royale d’Agriculture wrote avidly of the fruitful potato harvest he had witnessed, and the entire crop that had been dedicated for the poor. Moved by the efforts of the community to meet the needs of the impoverished, he

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10 Ibid., March 13, 1777, 3.
11 Ibid., May 13, 1781, 338
exclaimed, "le zèle des personnes bienfaisantes qui se sont réunies pour cette bonne œuvre ne s'est point ralenti."\textsuperscript{12} Mixing humanist vocabulary of "personnes bienfaisantes" with religious language describing their "bonne œuvre," this letter was typical of the period’s interspersing of religious and secular explanations for beneficence. While writers came from a range of backgrounds, women, parish clergy, doctors, and intendants shared common objectives. They wrote to mobilize further action among their fellow readers through the publication of their experiences.

Most of the letters concerning social welfare appeared in the pages of \textit{le Journal de Paris}. As members in charitable societies themselves, the newspaper’s editors were concerned about social welfare from the beginning of its publication.\textsuperscript{13} Nevertheless, letters reflecting the readers’ interest in improving humanity did not appear in the first sample year. Instead, it seems that both the readers and the editorial staff of the \textit{Journal} seemed to go through a learning process, as subscribers began writing an increasing number of letters concerning social welfare, and as the paper started classifying them according to the nature of their content. Indeed, while the \textit{Journal} gave headlines to certain letters on the arts, theater, or medicine the formation of a category in the form of a headline for letters concerning social welfare only appeared in the last year studied, 1787, after which nearly fifty letters appeared under the heading, “bienfaisance.” Before 1787, the letters covering philanthropic efforts and suggesting social improvement in France appeared in the paper without a particular headline or categorical assignment by the editors. During the same period, one can follow an apparent education to philanthropic concerns on the part of readers. Letter writers responded to previously printed letters, adopting the topics or language

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., April 11, 1787, 444.
\textsuperscript{13} Duprat, "Pour l'amour de l'humanité" : le temps des philanthropes : la philanthropie parisienne des lumières à la monarchie de Juillet.
that their fellow writers had employed. For example, one letter in August 1777 that promised a
donation to a *Société du bien Public* prompted a response from a fellow reader who praised the
société’s work.\(^{14}\) The first letters on the general theme of social welfare treated broader concerns
about public welfare in the city of Paris by relaying information about the individuals’ own
personal experiences. In 1777, such letters described investment in public works, efforts to
educate the public, or requests for charitable contributions from other readers.\(^ {15}\) Early letters
explained the benefits of beneficent societies, and advertised the founding of similar
organizations in Paris. One such letter was written by a man who had been involved in a similar
“société bienfaisante” in Germany, and he now wished to start one in Paris.\(^ {16}\) Writers also
emphasized the way their larger concerns about the public good were tied to their personal
experiences or difficulties, especially in the realm of healthcare. For example, one anonymous
writer documented the remedy that had healed her husband, in hopes that the information would
help others.\(^ {17}\) The *Journal de Paris* provided a venue in which individuals could share their
corns with the public; they wrote so that humanity might benefit, but their accounts reflected
personal circumstances.

By 1781, letters took on more well-defined motifs that referenced bienfaisance and
charity. Letters more routinely referred to the newspaper as a repository for beneficent action.
As one contributor put it, “un mérite qui distingue principalement votre Journal, & qui le rend
très cher aux âmes honnêtes, c’est l’attention que vous avez de publier & d’exciter des actes de

\(^ {14}\) *Le Journal de Paris*, August 20, 1777, 2.
\(^ {15}\) On public works, see *Supplement du Journal de Paris*, April 12, 1777, 8; *Le Journal de Paris*,
June 20, 1777, 3; On efforts to educate the public, see Ibid., March 13, 1777, 2-3; Ibid., March
18, 1777; On soliciting contributions, see Ibid., August 9, 1777, 2-3; Ibid., September 12, 1777,
3.
\(^ {16}\) Ibid., August 25, 1777, 2-3.
\(^ {17}\) Ibid., March 13, 1777, 2-3.
bienfaisance.” In particular, letters tended to serve two main functions: to present models of the good bienfaiteur, and to bring attention to institutions that met the needs of the poor, sick, and abandoned. Two such letters on model bienfaisantes explained the “actes d’humanité” that noblewomen had performed to care for their tenants in times of need. Accounts of beneficent societies in Paris and in the provinces communicated the situations of those in need, especially victims of fire, children, and the poor. Letter writers were concerned with educating their fellow subscribers and encouraging them to act upon what they had read by referring to the paper as a source of emulation. For instance, one writer said of le Journal de Paris, “j’espère que vous voudrez bien donner à ma lettre la publicité que vous accordez à tout ce qui honore l’humanité, & à tout ce qui peut encore réveiller cette passion si douce dans les âmes sensibles.” The goal of moving sensitive souls to beneficent action seemed to generate responses. In one account, the writer argued that he was so moved by a published letter detailing the needs of a poor family, that he donated money. This sense that letters could lead to deeds was frequently referenced in the letters of the 1780s.

In 1787, modes of writing about philanthropy in the city of Paris adopted forms similar to those in 1781, but the number of letters on beneficent subjects more than doubled. The Journal de Paris often printed letters giving voice to a range of charitable societies, which solicited the public’s help in their endeavors. Over the Journal de Paris’ first decade of publication, the

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18 Ibid., June 24, 1781, 706.
19 For references to model bienfaiteurs, see, for example, Ibid., April 3, 1781, 376-377; Ibid., April 18, 1781, 432-433; Ibid., May 13, 1781, 338. For beneficent societies, see, for example, June 6, 1781, 634-636; June 27, 1781, 718-719.
20 Ibid., April 18, 1781, 432-433; Ibid., May 13, 1781, 338.
21 Ibid., October 3, 1781, 1113; Ibid., April 3, 1781, 376-377; Ibid., August 11, 1781, 898; Ibid., June 6, 1781, 634-736.
22 Ibid., December 6, 1781, 1368-1369.
23 Ibid., August 11, 1787, 898.
newspaper grew to support a vibrant community of letter writers who spoke avidly about their concerns not only for the arts, sciences, and current events, but also for social welfare. They employed a variety of terms to describe their efforts. In some cases, they made little distinction between charity and bienfaisance. They acted to inform, to reform behavior, out of love, because of piety, or for the fatherland. For the Journal and its readers, learning how most effectively to express their philanthropic concerns, motivations, and activities was a dynamic process that employed a changing battery of techniques in an effort to engage the public.

The situation of those who deserved bienfaisance was frequently lamented in the letters. For many, health was the predominant concern. In some instances, the care was provided by a doctor, or by a noblewoman who nursed her tenants, or by a parish priest looking after his flock. However, in all such circumstances, the individual was carrying out their traditional duties that their social station demanded. Indeed, what makes such letters concerning health relevant to a discussion of bienfaisance was the language that writers used to articulate the care. References to the caretaker as beneficent, descriptions of their act as a “trait de bienfaisance & d’humanité,” or knowledge of the remedy as for “le bien public” used the same rhetorical tools to describe healthcare as other philanthropic acts. When the letter writers themselves were recipients of aid, help was almost always manifested in the form of healthcare—a medical cure or expert knowledge provided for their recovery. The goal of the letter was to publicize the success of the help they had received. When bienfaisance was done on behalf of others, recipients were most frequently the urban poor or victims of natural disasters. In their discussions of medical cures, technological innovations, and educational institutions, letters calling for charitable and philanthropic action seemed to demonstrate a tremendous concern for

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24 Les Affiches de l’Orléanais, October 24, 1777, 177. Le Journal de Paris, May 13, 1781, 338; Ibid.,
the poor. One such letter, referencing a hospital in the French colony of India near Surate, asked how the poor were to get rid of the fleas and lice that fed on their bodies.\textsuperscript{25} In many letters, the recipients of beneficence were cited as people of good character, and most frequently as fathers of families who had fallen on financial difficulty.\textsuperscript{26} One letter describing the men who were confined to a debtors’ prison spoke of them as “Pères infortunés presque tous chargés de famille & parmi lesquels il y en a qui ont eu 15, 17, 19, & 20 enfants.”\textsuperscript{27} Another contribution to the \textit{Affiches des trois évêchés et Lorraine} recounted the plight of a poor vigneron and “sa nombreuse famille” who were saved from eviction by their seigneur, “le Marquis de B.”\textsuperscript{28} In many circumstances, the poor were victims of natural disasters such as fire or harsh winters. The subscribers of the \textit{Journal de Paris} articulated the deserving poor as members of families whom misfortune had consigned to poverty. Letters calling for aid did not call for help for brigands or criminals. Instead the people who were in need of bienfaisance were the down-and-out—the poor, the infirm, the orphaned. The frequent references to the poor as “leurs semblables,” emphasized the notion that one helped out of compassion for one’s fellow man—a victim of circumstance. Rather than invoking traditional religious language about charity, such letters referenced the effect of seeing the needy on the bienfaiteur’s “âme sensible.”

**INSTITUTIONAL PITCHES**

The Old Regime press also printed letters by individuals associated with particular Old Regime institutions of charity and bienfaisance, like local churches, schools, hospitals, or orphanages. Such letters drew attention to local institutions providing for the care of the poor,

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., May 9, 1787, 558.
\textsuperscript{26} See, for example, Ibid., January 5, 1781, 18-19; Ibid., December 31, 1787, 1579; \textit{Les Affiches des Trois évêchés et Lorraine}, March 15, 1781, 84.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Le Journal de Paris}, December 31, 1787, 1579.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Les Affiches des Trois évêchés et Lorraine}, March 15, 1781, 84.
infirm, or abandoned by advertising, soliciting donations, or offering suggestions for an institution’s improvement. They provided poor relief, assistance for disaster victims, and monetary aid for the release of debtors.

The Church held a predominating influence over social welfare projects under the Old Regime. Parish clergymen often wrote to advertise charitable efforts or solicit public support for the social services they provided for the community. In general, their accounts publicized charitable acts within their local community. A portion of the correspondence written by curés focused on charitable acts by anonymous benefactors, where the priest acted as a trustworthy party to mediate the actions of interested parties. In one such letter, a village curé wrote of a small ivory sculpture, a Jesus mourant made by a famous artist. The anonymous owner of the figurine, knowing its full value, bequeathed it to a poor orphan so that its sale could pay for the education and establishment in the clergy of “ce jeune infortuné.” Such an act was not particularly new: the concept of a pious donor who would help a boy enter the clergy was common in the post-tridentine period. The curé informed his fellow readers that the work would be on display every day in the afternoons until someone offered an appropriate price to fulfill the intentions of the anonymous bienfaisant. The clergyman served as a reliable administrator who facilitated the philanthropic efforts of the interested parties. In the letters written by curés, concerns for the material and moral condition of their parishioners were fused together. Their words called for financial support for social welfare projects, engaging their readers in the projects they had undertaken. At the same time, though, they commended the virtuous, who

29 In some instances, clergymen wrote letters about social welfare in much the same vein as women did. For instance, a Brother Bernard wrote in to inquire about a medical cure, addressing his letter to the paper as a way to “instruct the Public.” See Le Journal de Paris, November 22, 1781, 1313.
30 Ibid., April 5, 1787, 415.
were not only pious, but also good citizens. Indeed, the connection to good works for those in need seemed to be the most important measure of piety. References to parishioner’s religiosity was absent from the letters, except for references to works of charity and bienfaisance, where the two terms were used interchangeably. For example, one priest in Paris designed a lottery to reward the “Citoyens religieux & bienfaisants” in his parish.31 Other letters attributed beneficence to clergy too—one letter written by M. Tallerye, the Archpriest of Partenay and Curé of la Chapelle-St-Laurent wrote that among the laudatory words he had heard on the occasion of his new appointment was that “La bienfaisance marchera devant vous.”32 Given the investment curés made in the material and moral condition of their parishioners, such an expression that found beneficence in his path seemed a commonplace. Indeed, the change the historian witnesses over the 1780s was not necessarily a change in the activities of the clergy, but in the way their work was conceptualized by the laity, and communicated to the general reading public.

In some instances, the clergy became the sole administrator of care for their parishioners. A letter written to the editors of the Affiches de l’Orléanais retold the efforts of M. Vervoort, the Prieur-Curé de Rosny-sur-Montreuil, who had recently died of the same fever that was plaguing his parishioners. The anonymous letter writer described the curé as “fidèle à tous ses devoirs, & qui portrait tous les Pauvres dans son cœur.” His treatment of the poor and infirm extended beyond the duty of his profession to convey the sentiment with which he cared for his community. Indeed, without fear or precaution for himself, he was “aussi assidu auprès d’eux qu’un père pourrait l’être auprès d’enfants chéris: enfin, il vient de succomber à des travaux si propres à honorer l’humanité éclairée par la Religion.” Like a father for his children, the parish

31 Ibid., September 12, 1777, 3.
32 Les Affiches de Poitou, March 20, 1777, 45.
priest worked until his death to care for the sick and to locate a doctor who could heal them. Such behavior mirrored the traditional conceptualization of the priest’s religious and social duty, and the imagery of Vervoort as a father certainly drew on a long tradition. Paired with such language, the writer also described the curé as a “Philosophe chrétien qui s’est sacrifié pour le soulagement de ses semblables.” The description of the priest as a Christian philosophe was new. This letter followed the structure of other testimonies of archetypal bienfaiteurs who sacrificed generously for the deserving poor and infirm. The language used to describe the curé mixed Christian and secular language, fusing traditional notions of the clergy with a new vocabulary for why they served the public—the curé bienfaisant, who helped “l’humanité éclairée” as a “Philosophe chrétien.”\textsuperscript{33}

Letters also publicized the institutions available to victims of natural disasters, especially fires. For example, a poor innkeeper described a fire that consumed her and her husband’s property. She wrote in to contest the letter that Grammont de Rozeli, an actor, had written to the paper, which specified that she and her husband had recovered their property and money: “il me semble, Messieurs, à moi qui ne suis qu’une pauvre Aubergiste, que ces Messieurs ont tort.” She instead conveyed their economic distress—they had lost everything. She attested that she and her husband had received the necessary permissions to beg, which were “certifiée par tout ce que notre Province a de personnes respectables, soit par le rang, soit par les mœurs.” The couple had a child who had been consigned to the care of the parish priest, who “veut bien donner le pain que nous n’avons plus.”\textsuperscript{34} The \textit{Journal de Paris} corroborated the story that “femme Vidal” had submitted in a note at the end of the letter that testified to the existence of the child in a letter from the curé and the certificate of permission to beg signed by the archbishop and the necessary

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Les Affiches de l’Orléanais}, October 24, 1777, 177.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Le Journal de Paris}, April 8, 1781, 397.
intendants. In other instances, government officials penned letters reporting on the aid mobilized to help victims of fire. The lieutenant general of police in Paris wrote a number of letters to report the donations that had been made in response the Commissaire le Blond’s letter that reported a fire in cul-de-sac Basfour that had left many homeless.\(^{35}\) Notably, it was not the Church, but the civil administration that organized relief after the fire. The letters submitted by the lieutenant general consisted of a register with the amount of each donation and the name of the persons who contributed, although usually donations were attributed to “un domestique de la part de son Maitre.”\(^{36}\) In all, some 2,669 livres were raised to support the people left homeless by the fire.\(^ {37}\) Such letters depicting local responses to natural disaster made visible the institutions that provided material support for the homeless as they publicized and solicited further donations.

New solutions to the problems that philanthropic institutions faced also appeared in published correspondence. A letter printed in February 1781 provided a detailed account of the administration of foundling hospitals and offered an innovation to improve their work. The letter detailed the manner in which infants were taken from Paris’ foundling hospitals and distributed to wet nurses in the countryside.\(^ {38}\) Some 15 or so babies at a time were transported by wagon from the foundling hospital to the countryside, accompanied by only two or three women. The anonymous letter writer was pessimistic as to the fate of such orphaned babies: most children

\(^{35}\) Ibid., April 6, 1787, 48; Ibid., April 15, 1787, 461-462; Ibid., April 25, 1787, 502.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., April 6, 1787, 418.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., April 25, 1787, 502.

did not survive, and the children that did survive suffered other maladies due to malnutrition. The writer cited the case of six women in the region of Château-Renard, in Gâtinais, who were accused of feeding foundlings cow’s milk. As the letter writer saw it, the major problem was that the wet nurses were so poor that they took in more babies than they could care for; the number of infants sent to the countryside needed, therefore, to be reduced. To that end, the writer suggested a new kind of carriage that would transport only six babies at a time in little baskets so they would not touch each other or sleep on one another. The carriage also made room for one attendant for each infant, thus reducing the number of babies sent and increasing the care they received on their journey to the country. 39 The sisters who ran the foundling hospital liked the idea of the new carriage, and both the writer and the women religious overseeing the hospital hoped to see it implemented soon. This letter received support in the following days, including the publication of a letter that emphasized the importance of work on behalf of the foundlings. The writer was deeply moved by living “dans un siècle où l’amour de l’humanité agit si puissamment sur les âmes sensibles.” 40 By outlining the way a particular charitable institution ran, highlighting the problems inherent in it, and suggesting means of improvement, such letters articulated an interest in innovation and a confidence that material solutions existed to address real-world problems. Letters concerning the care of foundlings and continual funding for foundling hospitals continued into 1787. One contribution to the Journal de Paris that was reprinted in Grenoble’s affiches called for contributions “si utiles & si nécessaires” for l’Hospice des Enfants Trouvés at the the Hôpital Bicêtre, just south of Paris. The letter elaborated on the history of such institutions by drawing the readers’ attention to a plaster statue of St. Vincent de Paul in the Cour du Salon de Louvre, which featured two foundlings at the saint’s feet. The two

39 Le Journal de Paris, February 4, 1781, 140.
40 Ibid., February 6, 1781, 149.
children symbolized the first foundling hospital in France. The writer elaborated, “cependant la Police avait établi, en 1638, un Hospice, rue St. Victor: mais suffît-il de fonder? Bien administrer est véritablement le caractère de la bienfaisance.”41 This notion of continued responsibility and long-term support defined bienfaisance for this writer. Bienfaisance by its definition, then, involved a continued investment in the community that provided for the continuing needs of unfortunates, of foundlings in this case. Furthermore, the responsibility of continued management inherent in the idea beneficence suggested that the public had an interest and duty to care for the ongoing needs of the poor, sick, and orphaned.

Finally, administrators of various charitable or philanthropic societies sometimes wrote to the paper to publicize their institutions and solicit support. In 1787, M. de Boissy, the treasurer and an administrator for the Compagnie de MM. de Charité pour l’assistance des Prisonniers & la délivrance des Débiteurs wrote at least a dozen letters published toward the end of each month. In them, he offered an account of those who had donated funds to help men imprisoned for their debts, and to support the elderly and women who were invalids. The letters included the precise amount that each party contributed and specified the use to be made of the funds. Occasionally, de Boissy would include the name of the alms giver—though most gave anonymously—and the reason that a particular donation was made. One anonymous woman contributed funds “donnés dans intention d’attirer la bénédiction de Dieu sur son mariage.”42 Another anonymous writer gave “en action de grâces de la guérison d’une maladie.”43 De Boissy’s letters publicized the charitable association’s business dealings, but they also conveyed to the reader the material difference that donations made in the lives of those the charity helped. Each letter ended with a

43 Ibid., December 31, 1787, 1579.
reference to the men who had been restored to their families because the charity had released
them from their debts. Over the course of the year, 60,503 livres were raised to meet the
organization’s goals, and some 920 men were released from prison. In the last letter of the year,
M. de Boissy thanked the contributors by speaking for those that the charity had helped: "Qu’il
nous soit permis de témoigner, au nom de ces pères & mères de familles, notre reconnaissance
aux âmes sensibles à l’humanité souffrante, & d’être les interprètes de ces enfants … qui ne
peuvent encore s’unir aux auteurs de leurs jours pour bénir leurs Libérateurs & leurs
Bienfaiteurs." 44 De Boissy’s letters were bold in their language, proclaiming the good that his
charity produced by means of the generous donations of its subscribers. Broadcasting the
massive success of his organization seemed to propel it forward, encouraging other subscribers
to contribute to the needs of the poor, elderly, and infirm. De Boissy invoked a combination of
Christian and secular language in order to garner support for his charity. He spoke of
contributions as alms, and he explained the motivations of contributors as petitions or gifts of
thanksgiving to God. He made clear that the acts of his bienfaiteurs were known in heaven. At
the same time, though, his appeals referenced the material needs of humanity and tracked the
practical changes that donations made in the lives of those who received aid. For de Boissy and
many other writers who worked in philanthropic institutions, Christian and secular explanations
for improving humanity overlapped.

Philanthropic institutions during the 1770s and 1780s took many forms. Schools, the
Church, hospitals, and private organizations mobilized resources and galvanized others to act by
writing letters that accounted for their commitments. Such letters educated the public, revealed
the needs of institutions, and provided innovations to better care for those in need. Letters made

44 Ibid., December 31, 1787, 1579.
use of a range of justifications. Some emphasized the need of equipping the poor with a patriotic education, so that they could better serve the nation, or of guiding the young so that they would learn to be good citizens in their manners and morality. Among organizations designed to fundraise, like M. de Boissy’s foundation, references to Christian charity were more pronounced.45

HUMANITARIAN ACTIONS BY INDIVIDUALS

Letters not only sketched the character of the recipients of social welfare; they also focused on the model of the good, effective bienfaiteur. Such letters outlined the characteristics of public virtue, demonstrating the role of philanthropy in the lives of model citizens, and encouraging the public to take part in such programs. The nature of such actions took a range of forms. Individuals gave alms to charities out of thanksgiving or as a petition to God. Explanations for why people gave, then, cited a range of motivations. Nevertheless, the language of feeling moved to act for the love of humanity out of the sensitivity of one’s soul was a vocabulary that letters on philanthropic institutions shared.

In some cases, the letters referred to bienfaisance as a noble, inherent quality. For instance, accounts that made reference to the king referred to him as “un bienfaisant Roi,” who was noted for his love and faithfulness to his people.46 Nevertheless, many letters were quick to assert the universality of charitable virtue, as a quality that anyone could possess and deploy. For instance, one letter writer noted a case of honesty over personal salary that he observed,

46 Ibid., January 6, 1781, 22-23.
prompting the writer to argue “la vertu est de tous les états & de tous les âges.” He suggested that other readers send in their own examples of acts of public virtue that they had witnessed in their daily lives. For the readers of the Journal, then, virtue was evident in the lives of both servants and the nobility. By writing letters that offered examples of virtuous character, of love for one’s fellow man, and of honest conduct in one’s daily life, they presumably hoped to shape a model for behavior that their fellow citizens could observe and emulate.

One especially thorough treatment of a model bienfaiteur appeared in the Journal de Paris in response to a particularly severe epidemic in Savigny, near the town of Beaune. The doctor who penned the letter wrote that “le fait suivant me paroît de nature a être consigné dans les annales de la Bienfaisance, & votre Journal en est le dépôt.” In the letter that followed, he recounted the amazing efforts of “Madame la Marquise de M***,” a local noblewoman who worked tirelessly for the people of her community. Already 40 people had succumbed to the epidemic, but the Marquise worked in the service of those affected. Opening her home, she made the kitchen of her chateau the hospital kitchen, where she also equipped a pharmacy. She visited the sick night and day, ignoring the danger of contagion, which the doctor assured his fellow readers, was a legitimate concern. The doctor argued that all people should be consecrated to the service of those suffering from maladies. He noted that while her service honored her sex and her rank, her actions spoke most of all to “un nouveau trait du caractère national.” Because the Marquise so clearly typified the new national character, the doctor believed that “la publication peut être utile, parce que rien n’est plus persuasive que l’exemple.”

In a similar vein, the letter published in 1781 in the Affiches du Dauphiné was written by a man who was saved from a premature burial by a “médecin bienfaisant” who cared for him.

47 Ibid., January 9, 1781, 35.
48 Ibid., 13 May 1781, 338.
during a bout of illness that made it impossible for the patient to speak. Another letter that same year in the *Affiches de Lorraine* profiled an anonymous Marquis in the “Village de F…” who saved one of his tenants from eviction by paying his debts. The letter writer exclaimed,

> Je ne puis vous exprimer la sensation que cet acte d’humanité a faite sur ces bons villageois. Le Vigneron & sa famille tombèrent aux genoux de M. le Marquis de B… pour lui témoigner leur reconnaissance; mais ce Seigneur se déroba à l’expression de leur gratitude; il leur répondit simplement, allez, mes amis, tâchez de vivre plus heureux, & vous trouverez tous en moi un protecteur.  

Such characterizations of beneficent actions by nobles reflected a traditional *noblesse oblige*, which ascribed to the nobility a responsibility to fulfill social responsibilities, often in the form of seigneurs caring for their tenants. Members of the royal family and the aristocracy fulfilled the notion of *noblesse oblige* when they were referenced in the *Journal’s* letters on beneficence.

Much like the nobility, the king appeared as an exception to an active characterization of beneficent action. He was portrayed as one who was always beneficent in character, whether he acted or not. When they did act, the king and nobility carried out the commitments to social welfare that their status demanded of them, demonstrating virtue in their care for the community.

Maille, Curé of Louviers, wrote a letter in this style that chronicled the visit of the king’s brother, the Count of Artois, to his parish and extolled the generous sum that the Count gave to be distributed among the workers in the town. A letter publicizing a school for the blind spoke of the audience with the king that was offered to some of the students. Letters referencing the local seigneur or his wife emphasized the care and material goods they shared with the community. In this manner, Montplanqua, a doctor from Nogent-sur-Seine reported a fire in his town in vivid detail. His account ended with an assurance that the local Seigneur “qui répand

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50 *Les Affiches des trois Evêchés et Lorraine*, March 15, 1781, 84.
51 *Le Journal de Paris*, August 6, 1781, 879.
52 Ibid., January 1, 1787, 3.
toujours ses bienfaits sur les vassaux, a pris des mesures pour leur donner des secours.”

Such letters by local doctors and priests drew attention to the efforts of local nobles undertaken out of duty, using very traditional language to describe the nobles’ philanthropic efforts. At the same time, though, they argued for other readers to emulate the behavior modeled for them by the nobility. For such writers, public virtue and the care of humanity were treated as traits one could learn.

Actions by government administrators provided support for other vulnerable individuals. One letter documented the generous gratification of 300 livres made by the intendant of Lorraine to a Sr. Lavanturier, as a reward for having “sauvé la vie à plusieurs personnes prêtes à périr dans les eaux qui inondent souvent la route.” The money was to be put toward improving the conditions of the road between Nancy and Custine or to build a bridge, “s’il était jugé plus utile.” The letter writer described the intendant as a “Magistrat bienfaisant veille à la conservation des sujets du roi, & au bien de l’humanité.” From the content of the letter, it is unclear whether the intendant’s donation was taken from his own purse, or out of the government’s coffers. While, at least in part, the letter described the intendant doing the job he was responsible for carrying out, the preoccupation with performing a beneficent act that provided a useful, practical solution to benefit humanity connected the intendant’s act discursively to the acts of men and women in other social stations. A similar “trait de générosité” appeared in the paper in December, when a regiment passed through the villages of Juville and Moncheux and donated 300 livres from their own salaries to help the town rebuild from the fires it had suffered. The letter’s author, a lawyer by the name of Bauquel included the aside that, “M. le Major a ajouté qu’il n’avait pas eu le tems de connaitre l’intention de tous les Soldats; mais qu’il était bien assure qu’ils étaient également

53 Ibid., March 15, 1781, 196-197.
54 Les Affiches des trois Evêchés et Lorraine, August 23, 1781, 269.
pressés de se priver eux-mêmes, pour soulager des malheureux pour lesquels ils avaient déjà si efficacement travaillé.”

Traits de bienfaisance presented examples of good works performed not only by men and women of noble birth, but also by the working classes. After 30 years of work, a journeyman working as an engraver in crockery was afflicted by a strange paralysis over the entire left side of his body—an “accident l’a réduit à la plus affreuse misère.” Having noted the virtue, good manners, and morals of their unfortunate brother, his fellow compagnons graveurs worked to raise enough money from their own labor to support their friend. The anonymous letter writer argued that if the Journal deigned to print the letter, the excellent example given by the workers would become less rare. The writer asserted that “les traits de bienfaisance ont toujours mérité de votre part les plus grands éloges, “ and it was the privilege of the Journal de Paris to “rendre publics pour encourager les gens de bien à les imiter.”

Similarly, in the Affiches d’Angers, one letter writer related the courageous and beneficent act of a peasant woman who saved her children and other village children in Ponts-de-Cé from a rabid dog, an act which unfortunately saw her bitten in the process. Presenting her as a model for emulation, the writer declared,

vos feuilles sont depuis longtemps, Monsieur, le dépôt respectable où se trouveront consignées ces belles actions dignes à la fois d’être transmises à la postérité, & d’être proposées pour modèle à la génération actuelle. Permettez-moi de me servir de cette voie, pour faire connaître à vos Abonnés un trait de courage, d’autant plus admirable, que l’objet en est plus affreux, & l’héroïne plus faible en apparence.

55 Ibid., December 13, 1781, 396-397.
56 Le Journal de Paris, August 7, 1781, 883.
The writer asked for donations to alleviate her misery and provide for her children. The paper seconded the request for donations and offered to collect them on behalf of those in need.\footnote{Les Affiches d’Angers, December 20, 1787, 228.}

As the letters depicting model philanthropists suggested, the Old Regime press served a particular function for many of its readers. As one letter writer put it, “tout bon Citoyen & toute âme sensible doivent de la reconnaissance aux homes généraux qui consacrent une partie de leur fortune au soulagement des Pauvres.”\footnote{Les Affiches de l’Orléanais, February 2, 1787, 24.} Such readers understood the paper as a repository for accounts of acts of charity, as a forum for discussing the nature of public virtue, and as a persuasive tool that would encourage fellow readers to emulate the models presented to them. It became an organ for publicizing the writer’s message, for formulating a model bienfaiteur after whom readers could pattern their own charitable efforts. The letters presented individuals from diverse stations in life who were depicted as acting out of an inherent virtue. In most cases, the good philanthropists depicted in letters responded to a particular circumstance, reacting to a trouble that beset their local community and mobilizing resources and service in order to meet the needs of a group or individual. The majority of the acts of philanthropy published encouraged the reader to emulate the public virtue of individuals about whom they read by acting locally to care for groups whom circumstance had placed in need.

One key component of such beneficent acts was the importance of the testimony of the action being written without the knowledge of the donor in question. One such account in \emph{les Affiches du Dauphiné} retold an incident that had occurred at the market the previous week that “prouve que la bienfaisance & l’humanité ne sont pas étrangères à cette classe de citoyens qui en paraissent les plus éloignés par leur état & la nature de leur éducation.”\footnote{Les Affiches du Dauphiné, May 25, 1787, 14-15.} The class of citizens in
question were poor peasants, selling their goods at the local market. Indeed, a bienfaiteur or
bienfaiteure could come from any estate; such letters reinforced the idea that anyone was capable
of good works when the needs of one’s fellow man appeared. In this situation, a peasant from
the region of St-Zacharie had arrived at market to sell his produce. After selling his goods, a
thief stole the twenty-eight écus he was carrying. The peasant, “chargé d’une nombreuse famille
& dont cette somme formait vraisemblablement toute la fortune,” drew his knife and moved to
attack the thief, determined not to lose his livelihood. At this point, the other vendors stepped in:

Les femmes qui l’entouraient, sautèrent sur lui, & parvinrent avec beaucoup de
peine à le désarmer. Jeanne Pascal, Jardinière, l’une d’elles vivement affectée de
l’état où elle voyait cet homme, mit la main à la poche, & lui donna les vingt-huit
écus qu’on venait de lui prendre. Les autres Jardinières, les Revendeuses
derbages & de fruits, applaudirent à cette bonne action, & voulurent la partager;
elles firent aussitôt une quête entre elles, & firent, par cette cotisation, les vingt-
huit écus volés, qu’elles remboursèrent à Jeanne Pascal.

By preventing the peasant from harming the thief, the market women spared the peasant an arrest
and punishment. Furthermore, through the generosity of one jardinière named Jeanne Pascal,
the peasant was able to support his family. Jeanne Pascal’s actions inspired the other market
women to donate funds to offset her gift. It was this spontaneous response by the community to
protect the peasant, and the act of generosity of one woman in particular, that inspired the author
to pen this letter. As the letter writer put it, “si l’on réfléchit sur l’importance dont doit être, pour
les gens de cette classe, une somme de quatre-vingts quatre livres, on sentira tout le prix du
premier sacrifice de Jeanne Pascal.” The writer requested the paper publish this letter as a way
to lend unsolicited recognition to the generosity of the market women. After all, he remarked,
printing Jeanne Pascale’s trait de bienfaisance would be “la seule récompense qu’elle & ses
compagnes en recevront, & elles le méritent.”

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60 Ibid., May 25, 1787, 14-15.
PROPOSALS FOR PRACTICAL IMPROVEMENTS

Many of the letters dedicated to the improvement of humanity were preoccupied with the material problems people experienced in their daily lives. The authors recognized a difficulty and responded with a potential solution that had rendered material results. In sharing their personal experiences or expertise, writers often relied on much the same language as that employed by those discussing more typically bienfaisant institutions. Such accounts emphasized the connection between the ideas of progress and social improvement with practical application. One writer summed up the promise of the age, “dans ce siècle d’humanité, vous le voyez, la philosophie & les sciences allaient à tâton.” Finding their way, as best they could, contributors used their knowledge to help others.

Correspondence emphasizing practical solutions for humanity’s problems often highlighted agricultural improvements. Among the government officials providing advice for avoiding difficulties, one particularly enthusiastic intendant, Maillard du Mesle, offered a thorough thesis on how best to avoid food shortages. His detailed account of a method for preserving wheat had been tested in Bordeaux and in the Colonies. He outlined the process of drying, roasting, and storing the grain so that it could be kept for future years. He had even sampled the bread made in 1780 with the grain from harvests in 1774 and 1775, and assured his fellow readers that it was excellent. Another intendant in Nancy provided the funds necessary to improve the road between Nancy and Custine, which often flooded, drowning travelers on the highway. He provided 300 livres to a local seigneur for the improvement of the road, or the building of a

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61 Ibid., October 5, 1787, 101.
62 Many affiches were closely monitored by intendants. The intendants tended to have access to and control over the provincial newspapers’ content. In some cases, the editors would insert a note du rédacteur after a government official’s letter, indicating that the letter had been printed by the intendant’s request.
63 Le Journal de Paris, May 6, 1781, 508-509.
bridge, “s’il était jugé plus utile.” The actions of this “Magistrat bienfaisant” were motivated by the intendant’s sense of responsibility to those he governed: “à la conservation des sujets du roi, & au bien de l’humanité.” Still other letter writers provided suggestions for facing the challenges of rural life. They wrote in to provide remedies for horses, or to offer advice about how to find nutritious ways to feed the hungry. For example a veterinarian penned a letter to the paper, motivated “par amour pour les chevaux,” and in an effort to share his experience, which “ma paru de nature à devoir être communiqué aux Amateurs & même aux Maréchaux.” His letter documented an illness referred to as rouge that was plaguing livestock in the region. The paper also printed correspondence from local administrators and farmers concerned with the condition of crops and the effect of harvests on the most marginalized, poorest farmers. Potatoes were an especially popular crop, because of their hardiness and high caloric content. They could even be ground down and used to make bread. Such letters praising the benefits of potatoes appeared as early as February 1777. Officials commented on the conditions of the growing season, and the effect it would have on the potato crop. In some regions, fields were set aside for potato crops that could then be donated to the poorest in the parish. Such letters were written spontaneously, in response to an incident or a need. The advice they offered was practical and material, and it tended to avoid lofty language used to describe the newspapers as repositories for accounts of public service. At most, the writers of these practical improvement

64 The content of the letter does not indicate whether the 300 livres were the intendant’s own money, or state funds. Nevertheless, it is the rhetoric mobilized in the letter which is most interesting. Les Affiches des trois Évêchés et Lorraine, August 23, 1781, 269.
65 Le Journal de Paris, May 27, 1777, 2-3. For a further discussion of maladie rouge, see "Maladie Rouge."
66 Le Journal de Bourgogne, January 5, 1790, 39.
68 Les Affiches des trois Évêchés et de Lorraine, January 4, 1781, 5-6.
69 Le Journal de Paris, April 11, 1787, 444.
letters invited their fellow readers to send in their own observations or provide financial contributions, but they rarely made claims about the Journal’s role in publicizing good works.

The letter writers who proposed practical improvements framed their suggestions as useful for humanity, publicizing material results and recognizing bienfaiteurs worthy of emulation. They further asserted that their letters needed to be printed, because the Journal was the particular repository for such information.

MORAL & PRACTICAL EDUCATION

Letters concerning the improvement of humanity took an especial interest in intellectual and moral education, holding to the notion that virtue was a trait that anyone could learn and practice. New schools were proposed to help the children of the poor. Such calls for education targeted populations like young girls, the poor, and the disabled who were in need of extra support and instruction. Letters emphasizing such pedagogical aims merged religious, national, and secular explanations for their work.

The welfare of children was of particular interest. A letter printed in Paris in January 1781 proposed the establishment of a system of National Schools, where children of 12 or 13 years could be received. The schools understood their work in both religious and patriotic terms: “notre principal but est de travailler à la réformation des mœurs publiques, en donnant aux enfants du people une éducation chrétienne & patriotique.” The representatives of the school spoke of “les avantages d’une bonne éducation donnée à la noblesse pauvre & aux enfants de la classe du people qu’elle tendra singulièrement propres à l’Agriculture.” Letters like this one were designed both to publicize good works and to seek financial support. Despite the writer’s ultimate goal of raising funds, the rhetoric that was deployed in the request was interesting nevertheless: he noted the limitations for social advancement, and he endeavored to improve the
situation of children within the limits of such a hierarchy. In order to provide for the needs of the children of the capital, he proposed a school, arguing that such an institution would “faire le bien de toute la nation.” In particular, he asked his fellow readers to contribute 12 livres so that the school could meet its goals. Accounts of such schools appeared frequently in *le Journal de Paris*. A letter printed in January of 1787 recounted a school for blind children’s invitation to court, where the students presented a book to the royal family. Valentin Haüy was the influential founder of this school; Haüy, himself, wrote two letters to *le Journal de Paris* in 1787 to advertise his educational endeavors. The writer, who identified himself as a “philanthropist” who was present at court that day, noted the skills the children had learned, the quality of their education, and the investment of their teachers. Letters on schools for the poor, abandoned, or disabled children emphasized the quality of education students received that would equip them for a respectable trade as adults. Such accounts spoke to the moral education that such schools provided for children who would otherwise be susceptible to the vice of poverty and city life.

Another school dedicated to the education of blind children sought to provide “aide des secours du Public bienfaisant de tous les Ordres de l’Etat.” The success the organization had experienced thus far encouraged its administrators to expand their vision for the organization so that they might “de jour en jour” reach a wider population, and eventually all of the blind in Paris. By providing an education for all of the blind in the city, they sought to equip them with “des ressources capables de leur procurer une subsistance honnête,” by endowing them with a moral

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70 Ibid., January 5, 1781, 18.
71 Ibid., January 1, 1787, 3.
and practical education. In short, their goal was to “rendre les fruits d’une utilité générale, il est
temps de préparer les moyens qui doivent opérer cette révolution, & de répondre à
l’empressement que témoignent beaucoup de provinces de la France.” The letter was penned to
solicit referrals. In particular, they asked that those who knew someone blind would write to
them, including the name of the individual, their age, the estate of their parents, their place of
residence, and the name of someone who had already been in contact with the association who
could act as a reference.73

In a similar vein, correspondence in the provinces communicated the goals of provincial
societies for the education and care of the blind, deaf, or mute. A member of a philanthropic
society in Angers dedicated to the deaf and mute community argued that they could learn “à
parler, à développer par la réflexion les lois naturelles de morale qui font gravées dans leur cœur,
à connaitre par des signes représentatives les lois positives qu’ils ignorant, enfin à exprimer par
le moyen de l’écriture ce qu’ils pensent comme ce qu’ils sentaient.” Such support for their
education expanded beyond basic proficiency, and emphasized their comprehension, power of
observation of natural laws, ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings, and not just as an
end in itself, but to equip them in their professions, even as s. He cited the example of a
successful mute printer as a further example: “n’est-il pas une infinité d’Etats qui n’exigent point
le don de la parole, & qui ne demandent qu’une intelligence exercée & le talent d’écrire. Vous
verrez chez M. Mame, Imprimeur, un Sourd & muet de naissance, déjà formé dans sont art,
quoiqu’il n’ait commence que depuis peu d’années à s’en instruire.”74 While the situation of
such schools in the provinces is less well known, studies of Paris have revealed the veritable
flourishing of such institutions in the eighteenth century. In the capital, the first free school for

73 Les Affiches du Dauphiné, November 23, 1787, 129.
74 Les Affiches d’Angers, March 4, 1787, 75-76.
deaf mutes was opened in 1760 by the Abbé de l’Epée, and later run by the Abbé Sicard. L’Epée is perhaps most well-known for his implementation of sign language among his students, which enabled them to communicate effectively and with nuance that was previously impossible. Amongst the research on the Abbé’s and their first school for the deaf, Sophia Rosenfeld’s work is particularly relevant. She has contended that the Abbé de l’Epée and other reformers like him sought to use language itself as a tool for social reform.\(^\text{75}\)

Parish priests also took an active role in caring for the moral education of their parishioners, especially young women. Cantuel de Blémeur, curé of Saint Severin in Paris, wrote the Journal to describe a foundation run by his parish each year since 1751 organized “pour l’intérêt des môurs & de la vertu” of young women in the parish. Like many other letters, the bienfaisant foundation publicized its work “pour l’encouragement de tant de Citoyens religieux & bienfaisants, amis & apôtres de la vertu par leurs bienfaits & leurs exemples.” The Foundation functioned as a lottery that all “les filles sages” of the Parish could enter. The prize of 100 livres would be awarded to five young women who won the lottery. Carefully explaining the transparency of the selection process, the curé recounted that each year, a month before the drawing, all the eligible young women in the parish between the ages of 15 and 30 entered the drawing. Those women who entered were then evaluated according to their “môurs, piété & conduite” by the curé and other ecclesiastics. On the basis of the religious leaders’ testimony, some of the young women would be removed from the list. The curé assured his readers, though, that the reputations of all the young women were kept private so as not to dishonor any of them.

Then, the drawing was held in the presence of witnesses. There were five prizes awarded to the young women in the presence of their parents to honor “des Mœurs, de la Religion & de la Patrie.” The priest submitted his letter “dans le doux espoir qu’un exemple si intéressant sera suivi dans la Capitale avec le même zèle qu’il se multiplie dans les Provinces.” By writing about the foundation in his parish, he intended to inspire other locations to reward those who were “vrais Citoyens,” who demonstrated “la Vertu des Disciples” in their adherence to religious tenets and in their conduct in the community. For this curé and many of his fellow writers, pious and patriotic language was fused together.

In a similar manner to the curé’s lottery for virtuous young women, the Académie Française gave an annual prix de vertu. A letter penned by an Avocat en Parlement that appeared in both the Journal de Paris and then later in the Affiches du Dauphiné nominated a virtuous woman who had demonstrated tremendous fidelity. A servant woman named La Blonde had been in the employ of the Migeon family for some twenty years. M. Migeon was a négociant, and when he died he left his wife, aged 30, and their two young children without anything, in the words of the letter writer, “sans pain.” La Blonde refused to abandon the family, and stayed with them; despite Madame Migeon’s encouragement to seek new employment, La Blonde demurred. After all, she argued, “qui prendra soin de cette famille, si je l’abandonne?” She continued to serve the family, but within months the widow Migeon fell ill, “consumée de chagrin,” and sold everything she had to pay her bills. After the widow’s death, La Blonde didn’t want to leave the children, so she offered to provide for their subsistence: “La Blonde ne l’a pas voulu, elle a dit qu’à Ruel, son pays natal, ses 200 liv. de rente suffiraient à leur subsistance & à la sienne. On ne lui a pas permis de les emmener. Le Sr Charpentier les a recueillis chez lui,

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76 Le Journal de Paris, September 12, 1777, 3.
c’est chez lui qu’on les peut voir.” The writer asked that the paper publish this letter for two reasons, first, because “votre Journal est devenu plus intéressant & plus précieux, depuis que vous vous êtes fait un devoir de transmettre à la vénération publique de bonnes actions qui, sans vous, resteraient peut-être ignorées,” and second, because the Academie Française gave a Prix de Vertu each year, and the writer wished to nominate la Blonde.77

CONCLUSION

For the readers of the Old Regime journaux and affiches, the newspaper served an important function: it kept them informed, gave them a space for debate, and offered ways of improving society. The readers sought not just to understand their world, but also to change it. The ways letter writers understood beneficence reveals that social groups had differing motivations, vantage points, and approaches to philanthropy. While many of those who undertook beneficent action were groups in Old Regime France that were responsible for such work, i.e. parish priests, doctors, and the nobility, the language deployed to articulate what they were doing and why they were doing it had begun to evolve. For many, bienfaisance was done through an understanding of Christian charity—out of piety, out of thanksgiving for God’s gifts, out of love for one’s neighbor. Interwoven with these notions, though, were more humanistic explanations: bienfaisance was the work of good citizens, of men and women of public virtue, and social reform served a public good.

The betterment of humanity cultivated a national character. Letters emphasized public service as “un nouveau trait du caractère national.”78 Those who participated in social welfare projects embodied this national character trait. And the targets of philanthropy were cultivated in this value. National schools emphasized their dual mission: to give children “une éducation

chrétienne & patriotique.”79 Their patriotic education equipped them not only as faithful subjects but also as “vrais citoyens.”80

Rather than indicating the decline of Christian explanations and the increase of Enlightened defenses of bienfaisance, as much of the historiography suggested, the two explanations for philanthropic work in the letters to the editor present a more complex relationship between the two modes of thought. Indeed, for many writers, religious and secular explanations were interconnected in the minds and writings of many readers. Over the years examined in this project, explanations invoking Christian and humanistic language were published throughout the period, appearing side by side in the same sentence of a letter in some instances. Indeed, the findings suggest the need to complicate the charity-bienfaisance dichotomy present in the historiography. Rather than exposing a harsh debate between supporters of bienfaisance and charity, the letters presented a mediation of the two concepts. Perhaps what was new was the fusing of the two explanations, as concern for the material and moral situation of the poor and infirm often went together. Explanations were intermixed, juxtaposed for readers like the letters themselves on the newspaper page. Ultimately, this study calls for a more nuanced understanding of why eighteenth century readers sought to improve humanity.

79 Ibid., January 5, 1781, 18.
80 Ibid., September 12, 1777, 3.
INTRODUCTION

For the readers of the French provincial press, the transformation wrought by the French Revolution on society in general, and on newspapers in particular was profound. The previously censored publications now were free to publish political content. After the first few months of the Revolution, the provincial press grew less timid in their coverage of political events, and the letters to the editor that they published voiced opinions on political matters. Joly, the Lieutnant Colonel of the Garde Citoyenne de Plancy-sur-Aube wrote in to his local affiches to praise the Revolution and the National Assembly that soberly and wisely guided its course: “la révolution à jamais mémorable qui s’opère aujourd’hui parmi nous, ne peut parvenir à un but salutaire que par les efforts & les sacrifices auxquels doivent porter le patriotisme pur, & le zèle ardent qui embrasent naturellement l’âme de tout homme convaincu qu’il est né pour la patrie avant d’être né pour lui-même.” For Joly, the unique moment in which he lived was driven by the beliefs and actions of his fellow citizens who cared for the community before themselves. His letter explained how the actions in the small town where he lived mirrored the admirable efforts taken by the National Assembly. He understood himself to be living in an enlightened age, where, “tous les citoyens éclairés sentent, en ces moments d’alarmes & d’anxiété, cette vérité inquiétante qu’ils doivent s’efforcer de propager, d’étendre & d’attacher, en quelque sorte, jusqu’aux cœurs les plus froids & les plus indifférents au succès de la chose publique.”¹ Joly’s belief that his fellow citizens would act in favor of the public good was rooted in the discourse that had guided the provincial affiches and their Parisian counterparts for the past two decades.

¹ Les Affiches de Troyes, December 30, 1789, 221-222.
Even amongst those who found the events of the Revolution to be unsettling, Joly relied on an informed citizenry to act for the good of their fellow man. Such trust in the human capacity to improve technology, inform one’s fellow readers, and to transform society was the foundation upon which the forum of letters to the editor had grown since the 1770s. Such ideas were put to new purposes during the Revolution, and the forum of letters to the editor played a key role in the transitional years of 1789-1791.

While the larger project of this dissertation speaks to the cultural history of the Enlightenment, this final chapter turns to the forum of letters to the editor during the first years of the Revolution, when censorship bans were first lifted, and newspapers were no longer subject to government oversight. The findings in this chapter are based on a sample of four newspapers: *le Journal de Paris* (Paris’ first daily newspaper), *le Journal de Provence* (published in Marseille), *le Journal de Bourgogne* (published in Dijon), and *le Journal de Normandie* published in Rouen).² They had began publication under the Old Regime and continued at least

² *Le Journal de Paris* was Paris’ first daily newspaper. It began publication in 1777, and continued to publish into the nineteenth century. Its editors were a group of men that Jean Sgard has described as “bourgeois obscurs” with friends amongst the encyclopédistes, Americans, and financiers. They were: D’Ussieux, Olivier de Corancez, Antoine-Alexis Cadet de Vaux; Jean de Romilly. Little is known of d’Ussieux. Guillaume Olivier, called Olivier de Corancez was a Genevan from a protestant family, and a great fan of Rousseau. He was invited into various salons, where he got to know a range of hommes de lettres. A.A. Cadet de Vaux was an apothecary, chemist, royal censor and health inspector. A number of celebrities were among his circle of acquaintances, including Diderot, Benjamin Franklin, and Madame Geoffrin. He was an Academician and a Mason. Jean de Romilly was a writer for the *Encyclopédie*. At the *Journal de Paris*, was responsible for the meteorology reports in the paper. In 1789, Dominique Joseph Garat joined the editorial staff and wrote the reports on the National Assembly. See: Sgard and Candaux, *Dictionnaire des journaux, 1600-1789.*

*Le Journal de Provence* was a prominent newspaper that began its publication in Marseille in 1781. It was published three times a week, and letters figured regularly into its content. The editor was Ferréol BEUGEARD, a moderate who was supportive of reform during the early years of the Revolution. See: ibid; René Gérard, *Un journal de province sous la Révolution: le "Journal de Marseille" de Ferréol Beaugeard (1781-1797)*, Bibliothèque d'histoire révolutionnaire (Paris,: Société des études robespierristes, 1964).
through 1791, adapting effectively to the evolving market and political climate wrought by
Revolution. The current study stops in September 1791: the flight to Varennes, the massacre at
the Champs de Mars, and the end of the National Assembly profoundly changed the tenor of the
Revolution, and the chaos led to repressions and disruptions of a number of newspapers.³

PUBLICATION OF THE PRESS UNDER THE REVOLUTION

The number of letters printed in the early years of the Revolution declined from the
robust publication trends that had prevailed in the late 1780s. Table 5.1 reveals the number of
letters printed each year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Journal de Bourgogne (published in Dijon)</th>
<th>Journal de Normandie (published in Rouen)</th>
<th>Journal de Provence (published in Marseille)</th>
<th>Journal de Paris (published in Paris)</th>
<th>total letters (by year)</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1787</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1789</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1790</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>22%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1791</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>total letters</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>868</td>
<td>1091</td>
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<td>(by newspaper)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>79%</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not surprisingly, *le Journal de Paris*, as the only daily, published the most letters. By
comparison, the three provincial papers were smaller operations. They maintained a less

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frequent publication schedule, had a smaller circulation, and maintained a smaller staff of printers, editors, and contributors. Overall, during the first three years of the Revolution, the newspapers experienced a general decline in the number of letters published (See Figure 5.1). This pattern held true for the papers in Paris and Marseille; although the smaller newspapers in Dijon and Rouen presented a more complex trend. To some extent, we might attribute these fluctuations to the amount of space the papers dedicated to articles about the National Assembly, which often took up the first page or two of the short folio (four-page) newspapers. Everywhere, the French were enormously eager to learn more about events in the Assembly and the extraordinary transformations in Paris and other metropolitan centers. The proliferation in print media, and the newfound attention to events in private correspondence convey the public preoccupation with news. Yet, in general, letters never ceased to appear, remaining a space for discussion and debate on both political and non-political subjects at least until the summer of 1791 (See Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.1: Number of Letters Published in Four Publications, 1789-1791

Figure 5.2 depicts the total number of letters published by month, as a rolling (3-month) mean.

Figure 5.2: Number of Letters Published Overall, January 1789- September 1791
Figure 5.3 indicates a baseline of publication rates under the Old Regime, measuring the total number of letters published by month in 1787, as a rolling (3-month) mean.

Figure 5.3: Number of Letters Published Overall, 1787

In general, the publication rates in 1787 stayed around 30 letters per month. Taken together, the four papers published over 20 letters a month until February 1790, when the numbers began to drop. The spring of 1791 witnessed another decline. Disaggregating the letters published in the provincial papers from the Parisian one reveals distinctions in the pace and volume of publication (See Figure 5.2).
Clearly, much of the overall change was produced by publication declines in *le Journal de Paris* alone. Indeed, as the *Journal de Paris* began to print more political news, the amount of room left in the paper for contributions from readers shrank. The steep drop in the number of letters published in the summer of 1789, for example, may well be attributed to the newspaper’s attention to pivotal Revolutionary *journées*, rather than a reflection that letters were no longer being received by the paper. Dominique-Joseph’s Garat role as a columnist and editor for the political content of the *Journal de Paris* increased the political content and shaped the ideological perspective of the paper until his retirement at the end of the Constituent Assembly.5 Garat was a relatively well-known writer of the Enlightenment, whose prominence grew during the Revolution. Indeed, he was elected as a deputy to the Estates General, replaced Danton as Minister of Justice in 1792, and replaced Jean Marie Roland as Minister of the Interior in 1793.

The editorial staff of the *Journal*, in general, favored moderate reform, like the abolition of the

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three estates. Garat was by far the most radical editor at the paper; a friend of Camille Desmouloins, Garat was often linked to more radical journalists like Jean Louis Carra and Jean-Paul Marat in neologisms, like "le beau triumlatronat" or references to their writing as "carramaragarage." Garat’s role as editor for political news in *le Journal de Paris* encouraged the paper’s move further left, although the daily was by no means as radical as the periodicals that Carra and Marat directed.7

By comparison, the rate of publication of letters by the three provincial papers fluctuated, much as they had done during the previous two decades. Indeed, the editorial responses of the newspapers in the provinces varied tremendously; some editors became staunch supporters of the Revolution, while others viewed events in Paris warily, and maintained a more conservative approach to the coverage of political events by refusing to print opinion pieces. In Marseille, for instance, the *Journal de Provence*’s editor, Ferréol Beaugeard was more conservative than Garat. Beaugeard had trained in the law, but he was too poor to purchase a post as a procureur, so he turned to journalism, founding his *Journal de Provence* in 1781. He was 35 when the Revolution began, and he continued to publish his paper until 1793. René Gérard’s thesis on Beaugeard and his *Journal de Provence* has traced the journalist’s political evolution in great detail. According to Gérard, Beaugeard welcomed the Revolution as an ardent patriot. His moving responses to the accounts that he printed, along with the shift in content toward greater political coverage, indicated his general support for the Revolution and the “solidarité civique” it

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provided. Gérard asserts that the onset of the war strengthened Beaugeard’s republicanism.\(^8\) However, his involvement in the federalist movement in Marseille compromised his position, and he had to interrupt publication until July 1795. While much less is known about Beaugard than Garat, a set of letters written between October 1795 and August 1796 between Beaugeard and Paul Cadroy survive. In them, Beaugeard abandoned the prudent, measured tone adopted in his newspaper for a more forthright one. Hostility for Fréron, anti-Jacobinism, and admiration for the generals who were able to maintain order in Marseille were dominant themes.\(^9\) Identified as a royalist agent after Fructidor, Beaugeard fled to Bordeaux, and was eventually arrested. He survived his imprisonment and the revolution, eventually settling in Lyon as a lawyer and abandoning his career in journalism entirely.

In Rouen, the editor was a little-known contemporary of the philosophes, who had been introduced by D’Alembert and Diderot at Madame Geoffrin’s salon. A member of the Société littéraire de Bayeux, of the Académie des Palinod de Rouen, and secretary of l’Opéra de Paris, Milcent’s true passion seems to have been the arts, which were featured in his newspaper. As editor of *le Journal de Rouen* from 1785-1792, Milcent guided the paper through the early years of the Revolution. He was in favor of the Estates General, and advocated moderate reform; he was active in local politics through the Société patriotique bretonne. In 1792, he returned to Paris, the city of his birth, though historians disagree about why he may have done so. A. Dubuc believed that Milcent was affiliated with the Jacobins, and thus he moved to the capital to participate in popular politics there. More recent evaluation by Christian Albertan has

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\(^8\) Gérard, *Un journal de province sous la Révolution: le "Journal de Marseille" de Ferréol Beaugeard (1781-1797)*, 105-58.

questioned whether enough evidence exists to make such a claim. What is known is that once in Paris, Milcent returned to his involvement with the Opéra—the arts remained his passion.  

The *Affiches de Dijon*, which would become *le Journal de Bourgogne*, was edited by André Villot, the oldest and least-known of the four newspapers’ editors. Villot began covering events in patriotic, political terms as early as October 1788, and the amount of space in his newspaper devoted to the proceedings of the Estates General and National Assembly grew over 1789. Villot’s political position changed over time: he declared himself a supporter of the Revolution in 1788 and 1789, became a member of the Jacobin club in 1792; by 1795, his new publication, *l’Original*, was clearly thermidorian in tone. Whether such positions reflected his true convictions, or merely an effort to keep up with a changing market remains unknown.

Over the first three years of the Revolution, editors adapted the Old Regime forum of letters to the editor to fit a new political, social, and cultural reality. Identifying the topic of all letters published between June and August in 1787, ’89, ‘90, and ‘91 in the four newspapers reveals the shifts in readers’ interests and editors’ publication habits (See Figure 5.5).

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The height of each bar indicates the total number of letters published, while the color blocks within bars represent the proportion of correspondence on a given subject. The summer of 1787 provides a sense of general publication trends prior to the Revolution, with letters on a wide range of topics: arts & letters; bienfaisance; and medicine, science & technology composed the majority of the letters published. Current events tended to include recent activities in the region, from fires that had occurred, to visits by the royal family in a nearby town. The coverage of such events were non-political in nature: editors and censors made sure that the content of such letters avoided any political opinions that might jeopardize the paper’s privilege to publish. As censored publications, newspapers were rarely permitted to print opinion pieces or letters on politics, with the exception of occasional decrees or news bulletins published at the behest of the government; thus, the letters published in 1787 cannot illuminate the political climate of a pre-revolution.
Nevertheless, such letters do lend insight into the mentalités of an educated public living during the French Revolution. In fact, to a large extent, the letters to the editor sampled in this study reveal the initial continuities between the newspapers of the Old Regime and of the Revolution. A substantial portion of the correspondence at this time persisted in its preoccupation with implementing practical, incremental social and technological improvements within the local community. Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 have investigated such attitudes in greater depth, through the lens of conversations on popular science and social welfare. One of the striking findings is that such interests continued to form a portion of the letters’ content in these early years, at least into 1790, even as conversations in the paper shifted toward politics.

A few categories did decline significantly—obituaries penned by friends of the deceased virtually disappeared. Letters on bienfaisance, which enjoyed tremendous popularity during the Old Regime, were not printed in the summer of 1791. Nevertheless, at least until 1791, the Parisian and provincial press printed letters on a range of topics. Such elements of continuity reflect the diverse interests of the public, whose curiosity about science, medicine, social welfare, and the arts persisted, even as the Revolution came to dominate the newspapers in general.

THE POLITICAL EVOLUTION OF THE PRESS

Nevertheless, the most dramatic transformation, was in the rise in the number of political letters (See Figure 5.6).
Letters that made direct references to the following institutions: the Estates General, National Assembly, Electoral Assembly, Municipal Assembly, Constitution, or National Guard have been defined as political. Certainly, a range of content within the letters to the editor could be interpreted as political. By 1790, even discussions on the arts or avis divers could conceivably be construed as political. For example, in March 1790, Taizy, the Prince de Broglie’s secretary,
wrote to *le Journal de Paris* to report that he had been robbed as he walked along the Rue Vivienne. He blamed the Palais Royal: "cet événement & ce qui m'a été dit à l'instant de tous les vols journaliers qui se sont au Palais Royal prouvent que les avenues de ce fatal jardin en sont garnies d'une foule innombrable de filous." He explained that "c'est pour prévenir l'honnête Citoyen contre les entreprises de ces coquins," that the paper should publish his letter. Taizy’s letter seemed to have been motivated by ideology, and the content was designed to insinuate the danger of the ideas and people who frequented the Palais Royal. Similarly, two anonymous letters covering the theater avoided discussion of institutions, but were nevertheless political in their content, too. Advocating against surveillance at the theater, they emphasized the role of the arts in a free society. While the political positions of the writers in these examples were opposed, their use of language to communicate their ideological point of view and to stir similar thoughts in the minds of the *Journal*’s readers could certainly be construed as political. Nevertheless, a measure focused on institutions allows for a general parsing of the letters on political institutions and actors from the larger body of letters. Even with such a narrow, institution-based definition, a great deal of conversation on politics was found within the letters.

In *le Journal de Paris*, letters in the form of proposed *cahiers de doléances* and correspondence written in anticipation of the calling of the Estates General began appearing as early as April and May 1789. On April 1, a future deputy from the Third Estate who identified himself by the initials C.D. wrote a letter on the local elections in Senlis, and asserted, “les distinctions de rang nécessaires à l’ordre social se confondirent dans l’unanimité des sentiments.” Throughout the late spring, letters began to test the waters on political subjects,

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14 *Journal de Paris*, April 1, 1789, 411.
even though newspapers remained officially censored until July. Despite their cautious tone, these early accounts revealed an excitement about the events through which French men and women were living at this time.

By the summer of 1789, when censorship had entirely collapsed, *le Journal de Paris* was printing letters on a range of political subjects, some two thirds of which referenced the proceedings in the National Assembly. Letters on political subjects that did not focus on the National Assembly frequently emphasized both the promise and the uncertainty that the Revolution generated, and they generally fell into three major sub-categories: first, a group of individuals who wished to “détromper le public” regarding the false attribution of a publication to themselves. A veritable explosion of pamphlets and brochures accompanied the end of censorship in 1789. Many such publications were anonymous or pseudonymous in nature, making it even more difficult to determine who had written what. Counterfeit and copy-cat versions of popular titles proliferated. Jacques Hébert’s *Le Père Duchesne*, which took to inserting the word “véritable” in its title serves as one especially familiar example of the lack of regulation that allowed impersonators to flourish. Writers penned letters recusing themselves of authoring such documents; appealing to the reading public to judge for itself the calumnious attack the injured party had suffered. Such letters that situated the reading public as the arbiter in cases of calumny remained a key preoccupation of letters throughout this period (See Figure 5.7).

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Letters defending personal honor grew over the early years of the Revolution, especially in Paris. Charles Walton’s analysis of calumny as an Old Regime continuity amongst deputies seems apropos for the general reading public as well. Letter writers routinely voiced their anger at hearing a rumor, seeing their name on a list, or coming across a publication that bore their name without permission. The findings based on a sample of such letters on personal honor complicate Walton’s thesis about calumny as an Old Regime continuity. Comparisons with the same newspapers in the late 1770s reveal a large increase in conversations of calumny during the Revolution, especially in 1790. An investigation of the first three months from 1779 reveal that the letters on personal honor comprised less than 5% of the total letters. While concern with calumny and protecting one’s personal honor seems to have grown more consistent over the

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course of the Revolutionary period under study.\(^{18}\) Furthermore, most of Walton’s examples concerned the nobility, who were particularly affected by attacks on their personal honor. Walton has illustrated that much of the recourse available in instances of calumnious attacks like duels, lettres de cachet, and libels were, in fact, available only to elites. Men of more limited means had to settle things for themselves, and often the resolution was found in fistfights on city streets.\(^{19}\) Perhaps because little legal or printed record exists of their efforts to combat calumnious attacks, commoners were less treated in Walton’s study. The letters to the editor sampled suggest that commoners were far less touched by attacks on personal honor before the Revolution began.

Over the course of the summer, political letters tended to emphasize the significance of the world-historical moment through which the writer was living, and such accounts experimented with the new possibilities the Revolution might hold. As early as July 17, 1789, a letter appeared in *le Journal de Paris*, lauding the momentous character of such revolutionary times, comparing the emergence of wise and gifted political leadership to the birth of a fully armed Minerva springing from Jupiter’s brain.\(^{20}\) An anonymous letter in August called for the institution of a *fête nationale* to celebrate the unparalleled events of the past month, and proposed a grand meal that would bring together everyone, without regard for social difference:

> Je voudrais que tous les Habitants de la bonne Ville de Paris fissent dresser leurs tables en public, & prissent leurs repas devant leurs maisons. Le riche & le pauvre seraient unis, & tous les rangs confondus. Les rues, ornées de tapisseries, jonchées de feuilles & de fleurs, il serait défendre d’y cheminer en voiture ou à

\(^{18}\) A cursory investigation of the first three months from 1779 reveal that the letters on personal honor comprised less than 5% of the total letters. While concern with calumny and protecting one’s personal honor seems to have grown more consistent over the course of the Revolutionary period under study.


\(^{20}\) *Journal de Paris*, July 17, 1789, 892-893.
cheval. Toute la Garde nationale sur pied maintiendrait aisément l’ordre partout. La Capitale, d’un bout à l’autre, ne formerait qu’une immense famille; on verrait un million de personnes assise à la même table; la santé du Roi serait portée au son de toutes les cloches, au bruit de cent coups de canon, des salves de toute la mousqueterie, & au même instant dans tous les quartiers de Paris; & ce jour la Nation tiendrait son grand couvert.²¹

This letter prefigures a wide practice in Paris, especially after 1792, le banquet républicain.²² Letters like these articulated a utopian vision of the future; such a perspective was dramatically different from the practical, local, and incremental changes that writers prior to the revolution invariably articulated in their letters. By comparison, the novelty and boldness of letters published in 1789 was striking.

Not all writers expressed such a positive outlook on the Revolution; however, some made reference to the instability wrought by Revolution in their accounts of crowds gathering in the streets, fears of brigands in the countryside, and efforts to dispel rumors of hidden stockpiles of grain.

Letters recounting the presence of crowds in the streets of Paris adopted a variety of tones. For instance, one printed on July 19, depicted a peaceful crowd of women with a clear agenda. After Saturday prayers in the Eglise Sainte-Genevieve dedicated “pour le rétablissement de la paix,” a crowd gathered: “pendant la Messe, les Dames de la place Maubert ont apporté un bouquet orné de rubans, qui a été placé à l’instant, près de la Chasse de Ste Geneviève. Elles ont

²¹ Ibid., August 30, 1789, 1088-1089.
²² The practice of “le banquet républicain” has been discussed by historians, especially in regards to the songs written for such occasions. Maurice Agulhon, Les mots de la république (Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail-Toulouse, 2007), 19. The songs written for such banquets have been studied by Laura Mason and Frédéric Derne. Laura Mason, Singing the French Revolution: Popular Culture and Politics, 1787-1799 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Frédéric Derne, "La chanson, "arme" révolutionnaire et chambre d'écho de la société en Auvergne," Annales historiques de la Révolution française 341, no. juillet-septembre (2005).
refusé toute gratification, en demandant seulement pour le people du pain & la liberté.”

The letter describing the women’s demands was penned by Jacquinot, the secretary of the St-Etienne-du-Mont district. A recent study by Katie Jarvis of a similar group of marketwomen, les Dames des Halles, finds that such groups only used “liberty” as a demand that referenced specific marketplace issues that affected their business, like the freedom to sell on public space, or the freedom to rent from multiple shelter provider. This comparison study suggests that the addition of demands for “la liberté” was likely an editorial flourish, either on the part of Jacquinot or of the newspaper.

Crowds more often, though, were characterized as uncontrollable and menacing. Descriptions of the fall of the Bastille, however, and the murders of Foulon de Doué and Berthier de Sauvigny characterized the masses as immense mobs that demanded death and destroyed private property. On August 5, an anonymous letter recounted the day when the Bastille was taken; caught up in the moment, the mob tried to destroy the nearby residences of bourgeois families, and they succeeded in breaking doors and windows. Looting incidents do not appear in the standard accounts of the Bastille, which Jacques Godechot has thoroughly studied. The heavy rain the evening the Bastille fell forced most of those involved to take shelter or go home. Nevertheless, the letter asserting that such an event had taken place praised le Chevalier Laizer, who led his soldiers to defend the neighborhood and set up guards “pour éviter

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Descriptions of being swept up into destruction and violence by a massive crowd gave an impression of the summers’ events as unsettling and lacking control. The murder of the two Old Regime officials that occurred the week following the Bastille’s fall was outlined in detail by an anonymous letter on July 25th, which announced that “des mouvements tumultueux se communiquaient dans une foule immense qui remplissait la place [de grève]. M. le Maire, accompagné de beaucoup d’Electeurs, descendit vers la multitude, & efforça de la calmer. Le calme dura peu; de nouveaux cris de mort se firent entendre.”

Accounts from the provinces documented the stories of robber bands of brigands that circulated in late July. A letter from Crépy-en-Valois, which was signed by Dambry, Citoyen de Crépy, provided a detailed report of a rumor of brigands that spiraled out of control, in just a few hours resulting in the mobilization of “une troupe de six mille hommes armés, composé de Milices Citoyennes & de détachements de Cavalerie, en garnison dans les villes [voisines].” It turned out to be a false alarm, triggered by an argument amongst a dozen peasants in a field. A letter appearing the same day written by a procureur au Châtelet documented the climate of fear which he investigated in Normandy and Burgundy: “Nous avons vu partout que les faux bruits & les terreurs populaires agitaient les villes, bourgs & villages. Nous avons pris sur nous de les

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27 This letter was signed only with the writer’s initials: L. C. D. L. Ibid., August 5, 1789, 977.
28 Ibid., July 25, 1789, 923-925.
29 On rumors of brigandage, see, for example, Ibid., July 30, 1789, 949; Ibid., August 28, 1789, 1081. For further analysis of the spread of rumors during the Great Fear, see, especially Georges Lefebvre, The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France, 1st Schocken ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1989). And for a critique of Lefebvre’s emphasis on an ‘aristocratic plot,’ and a reevaluation of the chain-reaction panic of the summer of 1789, see, Timothy Tackett, "Collective Panics in the Early French Revolution, 1789-1791: A Comparative Perspective," French History 17, no. 2 (2003).
faire vérifier & aucuns ne se sont trouvés fondés dans ces deux Provinces." Another letter written by the Comité permanent at the Hôtel de Ville de Senlis reported that rumors of 2,000 brigands hiding in the forest was unfounded—the truth was that there were about 60 hunters in the forest, and they were only looking for game.  

In addition, throughout July and August, rumors regarding the stockpiling of grain circulated, and writers used *le Journal de Paris* to denounce accusations and clear their name. One letter trying to dispel such stories disparaged those who were quick to believe such unfounded claims: “La crédulité adopte avec avidité tout ce que la malignité invente.” Having conducted interviews and inspected the region, they reported, “il n’y avoit pas un seul grain de blé, ni traces, ni possibilité qu’il y en eût été déposé.” The Marquis de Paroy went so far as to offer an award of 1,000 écus to anyone who could prove the calumnious rumors that he was stockpiling grain. Letters emphasizing loyalty to the Revolution and declaring that the writer was not stockpiling goods were common. Such simultaneous optimism and pessimism, manifested in the tension between the great possibilities of the new regime and the fear of chaos, characterized the political climate of 1789. Timothy Tackett’s study of the pre-Revolutionary period, based on the correspondence of five future revolutionaries came to a rather similar conclusion.

Over the fall, the number of letters to the editor in all four newspapers decreased. In part, this may well have been a reflection of the changing priorities of the newspapers that devoted

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30 *Le Journal de Paris*, July 30, 1789, 949.
31 Ibid., August 28, 1789, 1081.
32 Ibid., July 9, 1789, 856-857.
33 On rumors of stockpiling, Ibid., July 7 1789, 845; Ibid., July 25, 1789, 925; Ibid., August 14, 1789, 1020-1021.
34 Tackett, "Paths to Revolution: The Old Regime Correspondence of Five Future Revolutionaries."
more and more of their space to covering events and debating policies. Indeed, the public fascination with events in Paris dominated the newspapers throughout this period. Then, between December 1789 and February 1790, the number devoted to political institutions rose again. Many were penned by government officials in Paris as brief, unofficial reports describing and justifying their actions. For example, the abbé de Bonneval wanted it known by his constituents that a previous paper wrote that he was not permitted to speak in the Assembly, when in fact he had been permitted. He declined to speak voluntarily so that decisions could be made more quickly. In a similar manner, Thouret, who sat on the Constitutional Committee, wrote in to correct some typos that had appeared in a circulated copy of a decree. He did so because the errors had confused the document’s original meaning.35

Throughout the winter of 1789-90, letters continued to convey the monarchy favorably, lauding the king’s support of the National Assembly and praising the royal family’s role in bienfaisant projects. Numerous contributions were printed on the royal family’s contributions to charity. Letters detailing the queen’s role as a bienfaitrice appeared throughout the period of 1789-1791. Of the five such letters cited below, three were written by the secretaries of Old Regime bienfaisant societies; M. de Boissy had written monthly letters to solicit donations and report on his society’s fundraising efforts for years, while Le Camus was the secretary of a society organized by the queen herself. Of the two remaining letters in this sample, one was anonymous, and the other was written by Caron, a sous-Lieutenant du Bataillon de Sorbonne. Caron’s letter described an incident whereby a young Chasseur in the battalion was injured by a horse in the Queen’s entourage. When she heard of the event, she sent her doctors to care for the

35 Le Journal de Paris, December 17, 1789, 1647; Ibid., January 30, 1790, 119-120.
young man, provided aid to his mother, and expressed general concern about his well-being. \(^{36}\) One particularly adulatory letter written by M. de Boissy on the queen’s noteworthy charitable donations referred to her as, “la Mère la plus auguste, le modèle des Mères tendres.”\(^{37}\) Such characterizations of the king were common as well. In a letter published on July 9, 1789, a writer calling himself simply “Un François” called upon the public to donate money to the poor: “les Français qui aiment tous leur Patrie imiteront sûrement mon exemple, & seconderont notre bon Roi dans ses intentions bienfaisantes.”\(^{38}\) The accounts painted a portrait of the royal family as model bienfaiteurs who were aware of and responsive to the needs of the public. In August when Versailles experienced grain shortages, and lines stretched 30-40 people deep at the bakery shops, the king and queen ordered that they did not want any pastries for themselves or their households during the shortage.\(^{39}\)

Letters often specifically linked support for the Revolution, the National Assembly, and the king. Nau Deville, a “citoyen-soldat” and member of the commité de Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois, recounted this sentiment at a dinner party at the Archbishop’s residence in the grounds of the Louvre. The Compagnies Volontaires du Bataillon de St-Germain-l’Auxerrois, the troisième Compagnie, and the Comité de Saint-Germanin-l’Auxerrois were all invited to partake in the festivities. After a mass at the Église de Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois, complete with military music, the guests then proceeded to the archbishop’s residence for a dinner party, where some five or six hundred guests were seated. While in the church they had entered and exited according to their order, at dinner “l’ordre fut rompu,” and guests sat without regard to rank or

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\(^{36}\) Ibid., February 10, 1790, 163; Ibid., March 31, 1790, 359-360; Ibid., May 5, 1790, 504; Ibid., Supplement du Journal de Paris, January 22, 1791, i-ii; Ibid., May 16, 1791, ii.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., December 22, 1789, 1671-1672.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., July 7, 1789, 845.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., August 16, 1789, 1032-1033.
order; after all, “c’était une famille de Citoyens, on était sûr de trouver surtout un Citoyen.” After a moment of silence devoted to God, “d’ordinaire au commencement de tous repas,” the silence was broken by a general proclamation to the health of the king. Each man grabbed his hat, and “les cris de vive le Roi, vive notre Général, vive la Nation, font retentir la salle;” he remarked that “on paraît être dans l’ivresse: on y est. C’est celle du patriotisme.”

A writer from Grenoble echoed such sentiments, describing a public reading of the king’s speech before the National Assembly on February 2, which was met with cries of joy that echoed through the streets.

By the spring of 1791, however, references to the king no longer appeared, and there were no references that summer to the king’s flight to Varennes in the Journal de Paris. The only indication of the event in the four papers under investigation was in a single letter in the Journal de Normandie. It is striking that this lack of coverage of the king in published correspondence occurred even before Varennes. Why this was the case remains unclear, but it is likely that more conservative citizens were no longer reading and writing to le Journal de Paris.

Garat’s role as the political editor of the paper had, by 1791, altered the content and the political vantage point of the paper further to the left. And conservative papers were abundant too. The proliferation of newspapers printing on a daily schedule had provided Parisian and provincial readers with more options for reading material.

Even amongst letters that were chiefly concerned with non-political topics like the arts or medicine, references to Revolution became part of common parlance. For example, an anonymous letter calling for bienfaisant contributions explained how the efforts of his société philanthropique in Paris aligned with the efforts of “les dignes Représentants de la Nation” who...

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40 Supplement du Journal de Paris, February 11, 1789, i.
41 Le Journal de Paris, February 22, 1790, 212.
42 Le Journal de Normandie, June 29, 1791, 1024.
occupied themselves solely with making all Frenchmen a “peuple de frères,” and fixing on an unshakable foundation the happiness of those whom society has forgotten. One particularly interesting account by a doctor Pinel focused on the effects of the uncertainty of the Revolution on public health: he argued that the Revolution was marked by “l’extrême développement qu’elles [les révolutions] donnent aux passions humaines.” Such events had transformed the social body through a political awakening, generally improving the health and well-being of the public. He remarked that in the decades preceding the revolution, he had observed in the Capital, “toutes les infirmités d’un ordre social prêt à expirer, ou, pour me servir d’une expression que Rousseau employait en 1760, d’une constitution déclinante qui menaçait la France d’un prochain délabrement.” Pinel saw the last decades of the Old Regime as a society in decay, which was borne out on the bodies of its people: “les maladies catarrhales multiplies à l’infini, inséparables de l’atonie du corps, & produisant à leur tour une foule de maladies chroniques: enfin je ne dois point omettre que le relâchement de tous les lieus de la société & les progrès funestes de l’intérêt personnel avaient glacé tous les cœurs, sans cesse attristés & découragés par l’idée d’un pourvoir arbitraire.” A year later into the Revolution, Pinel declares, “tout a pris une face nouvelle.” All of a sudden, a éclaté dans la Capitale la plus violente explosion de patriotisme & de courage contre une forteresse regardée comme l’opprobre du nom françois; la commotion s’est communiqué à la fois dans toutes les Provinces, & la France s’est couverte de Soldats armés pour la défense commune & la sauve garde de l’Assemblée Législative. La plus active vigilance a déconcerté les complots ténébreux, triste partage de l’impuissance irritée, & nos regards satisfaits reposent sur le spectacle le plus propre à élever l’arme, la réunion générale des plus grandes lumières & le concours unanime de toutes les forces pour la prospérité publique. L’imagination s’agrandit en voyant s’élever l’édifice majestueux d’une nouvelle organisation sociale digne d’un siècle de lumières : c’est au fonds du cœur & non sur la langue que retentit le nom sacré de Patrie, & la qualité de Citoyen porte désormais sur une base immuable.

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In most people, this dramatic transformation had beneficial effects for the body, like “une sérénité calme & quelquefois un enthousiasme plus ou moins ardent,” and many of his patients had reported to him that “‘Je me porte mieux depuis la révolution.’” The Revolution seemed to have reset the balance of nature, and “comme par une vertu électrique,” reanimated the body and soul with “une vie nouvelle.”44 The metaphor of the revolution as an electric shock to the body and soul echoed the treatments of Franz Mesmer and the parlor experiments with electric currents that were so popular in the last decade of the Old Regime.

At the same time, the doctor warned of “terreurs paniques” and “mouvements brusques & comme convulsifs” from which those with weaker constitutions “à tous les orders de la société” had experienced. One man suffering chest pain and a particularly violent onset of tremors had died. Women seemed to be particularly susceptible to such episodes, which the doctor attributed to “leur excès de sensibilité.”45 The Doctor Pinel’s letter revealed the way in which the Revolution had come to shape every aspect of lived experience. Particularly concerned with the constitution of human bodies, he turned to the body politic in order to measure the health of the nation, and in general, he found revolution beneficial to the body and the soul. Nevertheless, Pinel pointed out the potential harms that social change and ensuing instability could present to his patients. Thus, even the National Guardsman, who described patriotism as a form of intoxication, or this doctor, who documented the psychological impact of tremendous change—both of whom praised the Revolution—could nevertheless shed light on the ambivalence and uncertainty of the new regime.

44 *Le Journal de Paris*, January 18, 1790, 70-72.
45 Ibid.
After a sharp dip in March 1791, the number of letters on politics in Paris leveled off, then dropped again in June. The political topics began to shift. Previously, writers had limited their declarations of loyalty to the Revolution and to the Constitution in general, but now writers seemed more willing to specify their affiliation with a specific political club, group, or ideological position. Mentions of membership (or denial of membership) in a club were the subject of a number of letters, like the letter that the Jacobin deputy François Charles Bouche wrote to *Le Journal de Paris*.  

A M. Schultz wrote on behalf of M. de Goltz, le ministre de Prusse, to explain his position not as an “enragé,” but as a “moderate.”

Not only were writers prepared to identify themselves by their membership in clubs, but they were also more willing than ever before to take positions on the political agenda—they wrote opinion pieces on active citizenship for the Jews, on the need for freedom from police surveillance, and on a system for promotion within the ranks of the National Guard.

In addition writers offered more critiques of the revolutionary administration, such as the failure to control false assignats.  

In the provinces, interest in politics remained much more limited than in Parisian publications. The rise in political preoccupations that occurred in the capital during the summer of 1789, appeared in the regional papers only toward October and November. Initially, nearly all such letters outside Paris were accounts of people contributing gifts to *la Patrie*. A letter

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46 See, for example, Ibid., July 27, 1791, 839.
47 No location was given in the writer’s letter. *Supplement au Journal de Paris*, September 6, 1791, i-ii.
48 Ibid., September 15, 1791, i; *Le Journal de Paris*, September 5, 1791, 1013-1014; Ibid., August 16, 1791, 936; Ibid., August 11, 1791, 914.
49 Ibid., August 29, 1791, 986.
penned by “une Demoiselle Parisienne qui désire le bien général de la Nation” asked the Deputies of Paris to accept her gift to the nation of 2,000 livres. Referring to herself in the third person, she wrote, “son vœu aurait été de les présenter elle-même à cette auguste Assemblée; mais, voulant rester ignorée, elle se trouve privée de cet honneur.”51 Another letter written to the Marseillaise newspaper by a woman identifying herself only by L… reflected on the act of patriotic gift-giving, which had “échauffé mon imagination, & , quoique jeune & vive, j’ai réfléchi: de ces réflexions, il est sorti un projet qui me plait, & que je voudrais voir exécuté aussitôt que formé.” Despite her support for the Revolution, she did not want to give up her wedding ring. As she rather candidly put it, “les hommes pourraient croire que le mot de liberté nous a tourné la tête, & que nous voulons, par cet abandon, nous dégager d’un esclavage dont nous portons le symbole sous la forme de cet anneau. Je déclare que je serai toujours mon bonheur de le porter, en l’honneur du galant homme à la destine duquel je suis unie pour la vie.” Instead, she had adopted the patriotic practice of only using domestic goods, which she marked by the privation “de voitures anglaises, de fichus anglais, de rubans anglais, de basins anglais & de quincailleries anglaise d’aucune espèce.” She served her guests on French plates and silver, and her cupboard was devoid of English linens, knits, and buttons. As she saw it, stimulating French commerce, “de faire travailler nos manufactures, d’en établir de nouvelles, & de nourrir par là un grand nombre d’ouvriers qui manquent de pain faute d’ouvrage” would benefit the revolution more than her jewelry would. She hoped that the women who read her letter and emulated her actions would serve as exemplars of patriotic action for men in the community.52

Such letters penned by women often legitimized their writing of public letters based on concepts

51 Le Journal de Paris, September 11, 1789, 1153.
52 Le Journal de Provence, November 3, 1789, 221-222.
of virtue, the gendered implications of which Marisa Linton has illustrated.\textsuperscript{53} They described themselves as wives and mothers, as did one woman who wrote to \textit{le Journal de Normandie}, who expressed her particular attention as a mother of five girls and one boy “aux mœurs & à une bonne éducation.” As possessors of virtue and as the guardians of future “bons citoyens,” women expressed their authority in terms of their motherhood.\textsuperscript{54}

In January 1790, the number of letters published in the provinces grew as in Paris, and the range of political subjects likewise increased. In general, such accounts fell into three major categories: statements referring to patriotic gifts, questions on local policy implications of the National Assembly’s decrees, and occasional reports on local government administration. On the subject of the local impact of the Assembly’s policies, writers solicited further consideration from officials, or asked for clarification on how decrees might apply. For instance, M. Malardot, a Dijonais lawyer wrote in regarding a decree on taxation. His letter consisted of an analysis of the law and its ramifications, and in particular, the tax burden for the general public.\textsuperscript{55} A letter written to the editors of \textit{Le Journal de Normandie} by Dupuys, the curé de Salmonville-la-Sauvage, asked how the Assembly’s decree from November 2, 1789 that “les biens ecclésiastiques sont actuellement à la disposition de la Nation” would effect the rights of curés and the local peasantry to the fruits of trees on the \textit{appanage}. The ravages of the harsh winters had killed many of the trees, and the priest wanted to inquire about who was responsible for replanting the trees that had died.\textsuperscript{56} Sorting out how the National Assembly’s decrees would impact local officials and their communities seemed to be a chief concern of the regional newspapers. Still other contributions asked for reconsideration or further explanation of local

\textsuperscript{53} Linton, "Virtue rewarded? Women and the politics of virtue in 18th-century France.:Part II."
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Le Journal de Normandie}, April 25, 1789, 139.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Le Journal de Bourgogne}, January 19, 1790, 46-47.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Le Journal de Normandie}, January 5, 1790, 11-12.
administrative decisions, like the outcome of a court case, our access to price information.\textsuperscript{57} For example, a contributor who preferred to remain anonymous wrote in to question the decision of the local Commune, which had mandated that the paper no longer publish prices for commodities sold in Dijon. The decision was made, according to the writer, out of fear that it would lead to high increases in the price of grain. Disagreeing with the argument, he argued that for the sake of the poor in the country, the prices should be listed.\textsuperscript{58}

Following the winter months of 1790, the publication of letters in the provinces on political topics declined, and by summer 1791, political letters were infrequent. Responses to individual letters were published less often, and the regional press was no longer the space for debate and conversation it had once been. While we cannot know why letters ceased to be published, it is possible that now that other newspapers were publishing in the same town, readers found new venues for debate, or that editors thought other formats could be more marketable. After all, a proliferation of organizations provided new spaces for debate and facilitated more efficient responses from those in authority than the newspapers ever had. For instance, the neighborhood section meetings, first organized for the election of regional and national representatives, continued to meet spontaneously and provide for local administrative needs. Political cafès became vibrant spaces where information was read, announced, and debated. And there was a great proliferation of popular clubs, which began as gatherings for deputies to the National Assembly to discuss policy, and grew into networks that spread throughout the provinces to unite partisans around a shared ideological position and policy

\textsuperscript{57} On the benefits of listing the prices of goods, \textit{Le Journal de Bourgogne}, January 19, 1790, 47; On the release of four Englishmen from prison, Ibid., January 5, 1790, 38.\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., January 19, 1790, 47.
agenda. In just three years, 1,500 clubs had formed throughout France; indeed by 1791, every department had at least one. Jean Boutier et al. have underscored the urban nature of the clubs: all towns with more than 4,000 residents, 97% of those with 3,000 to 4,000 residents, 87% of those with 2,000 to 3,000 residents had at least one club in town between 1789 and 1794. The larger the town, the greater role the club took on in the administrative hierarchy. Clubs also served to connect the provincial town to a national network. As Boutier et al. put it, “le réseau urbain structure ainsi le réseau des sociétés politiques. Il lui donne sa rapide extension nationale, son homogénéité spatiale, ses premières disparités.” Much as newspapers, confraternities, and other associative bodies had provided space for debate and motivated projects for social improvement, clubs now moved into that discursive space, providing news means of sociability, and facilitating greater accountability from both the local administration and the national government.

59 The Revolutionary sections, which were first organized to vote representatives into office, but which then continued to meet to resolve local administrative problems, have in general been less studied. For the most part, they are treated in studies of Revolutionary Paris more generally, although an article by David Garrioch has evaluated one revolutionary section in greater detail. David Garrioch, "The Local Experience of Revolution: the Gobelins/Finistère Section in Paris," French History and Civilization 1(2005). On cafés, Thierry Rigogne’s current book project evaluates the café as a space of information exchange and sociability, the contours of which he discussed at the 2014 American Historical Association meeting. Rigogne, "The Café as Information Exchange: Coffeehouses at the Heart of the Communication System in Eighteenth-Century Paris." For earlier work on cafés frequented by the working classes during the Revolution, see W. Scott Haine, The World of the Paris café: Sociability among the French Working Class, 1789-1914 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). On the formation of political clubs amongst deputies, see, especially, Philippe Boutrry Jean Boutier, Serge Bonin, Les sociétés politiques, ed. Claude Langlois Serge Bonin, Atlas de la Révolution Française (Paris: l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1987). For additional analysis of the role of clubs in political formation in the National Assembly, see Timothy Tackett, Becoming a Revolutionary: the Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). For a study of political clubs in the provinces, see Michael L. Kennedy, The Jacobin Clubs in the French Revolution: the First Years (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982).

60 Jean Boutier, Les sociétés politiques, 16.

61 Les sociétés politiques, 38.
Certainly, politics was by no means the only thing people were writing about. Political letters comprised just over a third of all of the correspondence to the editors published between 1789 and 1791. The topics of arts & letters, bienfaisance, and medicine, science & technology formed the majority prior to 1789, and they continued to comprise 25% of the content of the published correspondence during the period of 1789-1791. Indeed, most of the correspondence at this time remained preoccupied with implementing practical, incremental social and technological improvements within the local community. This interest in a practical Enlightenment remained the major focus of letters to the editor throughout France until 1789. While the attention paid to science and the arts waned, letters on these subjects did continue to appear in the newspapers.

Letters concerned with medicine ranged from questions on nutrition; to remedies for gout, leprosy, and hydropsie; to doctor’s comments on successful surgeries appeared throughout this period. For the most part, the letters were similar in style and content to those discussed at greater length in Chapter 3. Such missives focused on the amelioration of common ailments, especially respiratory problems, gout, hydropsie, and bad air, and the treatments consisted for the most part of herbal remedies. Doctors, surgeons, and health practitioners wrote in on such topics, sharing what they’d found effective with their fellow readers. Letters on science and technology also shared a variation in content that was rather similar to that evidenced in Chapter 3. Engineers and amateur scientists wrote in to publicize their new inventions, and to solicit critiques from the reading public. New inventions were announced as technical breakthroughs,

like a pump to extract the water in wells, a mechanism to improve the efficiency of mills, or a machine that could write as fast as one could speak.\textsuperscript{63} Other contributions on scientific topics were more observational in nature, covering the different readings gleaned from thermometers around town, documenting the behavior of animals in their natural habitat, or relaying the success of a sanitation system for latrines in Rouen.\textsuperscript{64}

Finally, a third subset of the correspondence offered solutions to the difficulties encountered during the harsh winter of 1788-1789. Some letters that appeared in the winter described the season as a veritable disaster. Two particularly devastating letters from Orléans appeared in \textit{Le Journal de Paris} on January 24, conveying the destruction in the countryside after an ice floe had become lodged against the riverbed, causing the Loire river to overflow and flood the Val de Loire, destroying the vineyards, drowning livestock, and stranding or killing the families living in the valley. The swift current of frigid waters filled with ice impeded the efforts of the local administration and the spontaneous action of farmers to save their families and friends. The beneficent and heroic acts of farmers, local nobles, and administrators were documented in the letters.\textsuperscript{65} A similar story from Lyon appeared the following day in the \textit{Journal}: the editors printed excerpts from a number of letters that they had received from Lyon, which conveyed the violent events that had unfolded as the Rhône river began to melt. The river had frozen over so much that winter that women, horses, even cabriolets had traversed across the ice without incident. As the ice began to thaw, the wooden pont Morand,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[65] The flood transpired in the Val-de-Loire on January 18, 1789, although the relief efforts were ongoing as the letters were being written. The first letter was written on January 19\textsuperscript{th} by a J. J. Marsan. The second letter was written on the 21\textsuperscript{st} by Romet, a lawyer in Parlement. \textit{Le Journal de Paris}, January 24, 1789, 111-112; Ibid., 112.
\end{footnotes}
était le premier obstacle que les glaces avaient à rencontrer, & cet édifice, dont la faiblesse apparente contrastait si singulièrement avec l’impétuosité du flûve, semblait devoir être facilement emporté par le choc des glaces énormes, des moulins & artifices qui viendraient fondre sur lui ; il était l’objet de l’inquiétude de tous les citoyens, & il est devenu celui de leur étonnement.

The letter described the torrential rain that accompanied this terrifying event, and the stunned onlookers who crowded the surrounding spaces: “les quais & toutes les fenêtres étaient garnis de citoyens.” The storm and ice lasted for two days, and the letters chronicled the destruction of property. 66 Indeed, the accounts that described the torrential storms and the devastation left in their wake conveyed the unusual nature of what had transpired. Some of the correspondence written by Parisian readers pondered whether there had ever been a winter so terrible. One anonymous writer had to look back to the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries to find a winter that had been as devastating. 67 A Parisian contributor identifying himself as A.G.P. submitted a rejoinder that while he thought the winter was the worst in a century, at least, there there had been winters in the mid-seventeenth century that were especially cold. 68

The Journal continued to print reports from throughout the kingdom that documented the extent of damage the winter had caused. The abbé Tessier wrote a letter from Paris that cautioned against too much worry over the bad winter. According to reports in Beauce, the fertile region between the Seine and Loire rivers, the grains in the field were growing, despite evidence of some freezing over. 69 A M. du Mesnil, a local lawyer writing from Roye, in Picardy lamented that, owing to the harsh winters, many of the wells and most of the cellars were completely frozen. He wished to thank the curé of Sainte-Marguerite for providing the necessary

66 Ibid., January 25, 1789, 115-117.
67 Ibid., January 6, 1789, 29-30.
68 Ibid., January 16, 1789, 70-71.
69 Ibid., February 2, 1789, 148-149.
funds to feed the poor in the region.\textsuperscript{70} A M. Crussaire conveyed the difficulty in Champagne, where the cold had put a stop to the mills, paralyzing the region.\textsuperscript{71} From Nantes, an anonymous writer described “les effets du cruel hiver” in Brittany, where the oysters had frozen, and the mussels had fared no better. Fisherman had continued to cast their nets, but “n’ont pu en pêcher une seule bonne.”\textsuperscript{72}

Farmers tried to mitigate the ill effects of the weather as best they could. Broussonet, the secretary for the Société Royale d’Agriculture wrote a letter to \textit{le Journal de Paris} on farmers’ responses to bad harvests. He recommended they try to limit the humidity to the crops.\textsuperscript{73} Another popular letter penned by Lenoir, a Procureur, appeared in both \textit{le Journal de Bourgogne} and \textit{Le Journal de Provence}. In response to various reports on the rigorous winter and its ill effects on livestock, he had run an experiment on his land at Marsannay-la-Côte, near Dijon. To test the cause of farmers’ reports on dead sheep that were put to pasture in the day and brought to stable at night, he put his sheep in the field overnight, and they survived. He argued that it was not the cold temperature that was killing sheep, but instead the difference of more than eleven degrees between the stable and the field.\textsuperscript{74}

A major concern that persisted into the summer was how to mitigate the grain shortages that were widely reported in the countryside. As early as January, letters suggesting recipes for bread that could compensate for the shortage of grains appeared. Potatoes—even the frozen ones—the writer assured, could be used to make bread.\textsuperscript{75} Reports on frozen grains and the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{70} Ibid., February 5, 1789, 160-161.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Ibid., February 6, 1789, 164.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Ibid., February 20, 1789, 233.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Ibid., June 21, 1789
\item \textsuperscript{74} \textit{Le Journal de Bourgogne}, March 17, 1789, 78-79; \textit{Le Journal de Provence}, May 28, 1789, 94-95.
\item \textsuperscript{75} \textit{Le Journal de Bourgogne}, January 5, 1790, 39; \textit{Le Journal de Paris}, January 7, 1789, 33-34.
\end{itemize}
related shortages continued into the summer. A letter from the abbé Tessier mailed from the Château de Rambouillet reported that despite the hardship of the winter, he firmly believed conditions were improving: the fields that had been seeded in March, April, and May looked healthy and abundant.\textsuperscript{76} He tried to quell anxieties about the social unrest that the lack of grain would cause, especially amongst the poor.

Letters documenting beneficent acts also continued to appear in the newspapers. More than 60 letters appeared on the subject of social welfare between January 1789 and September 1791 in the four newspapers under study. Some of the published contributions served as documentation of donations to various bienfaisant organizations, like an association in Marseille to support poor sailors and their families, the seigneur of Thoste in Burgundy who provided for the subsistence of some 56\textit{familles indigents} in the region, or M. de Boissy’s Compagnie de MM. de Charité pour l'assistance des Prisonniers & la délivrance des Débiteurs de mois de nourrice in Paris.\textsuperscript{77} The remaining letters were rather similar to those under study in Chapter 4: they raised awareness for groups in need of assistance, solicited the support of their fellow readers, and provided examples of model bienfaiteurs, among whom the royal family continued to appear. The biggest shift by far in the published correspondence on bienfaisance was that 50 of all the 63 letters published in the four newspapers during this period appeared in 1789. W. J. Murray has attributed this decline in beneficent letters to Garat’s influential role in the paper, who did not share the other editors’ penchant for philanthropic subjects.\textsuperscript{78} All of the 13 letters written after 1789 consisted of one or two forms: proceedings of bienfaisant organizations who accounted for their latest activity and the sums they had raised, or updates on the bienfaisant

\textsuperscript{76} Le Journal de Paris, June 1, 1789, 688-689.
\textsuperscript{77} Le Journal de Provence, January 31, 1789, 111-112; Le Journal de Bourgogne, December 15, 1789, 26; Le Journal de Paris, August 7, 1789, 984.
\textsuperscript{78} Murray, "Un philosophe en Révolution: Dominique-Joseph Garat et le Journal de Paris."
activity of the royal family. Letters documenting model bienfaiteurs disappeared entirely, as did letters positing general suggestions for social welfare or suggesting an interest in the mœurs of those who were poor and alone. The occasional content on bienfaisance no longer featured beneficent individuals, but instead covered organizations that used the newspaper page to display transparency in the receiving and spending of donations. Why this topic that had shaped the forum of letters to the editor faded from the newspapers’ pages is unclear. Perhaps the letter writers found new venues for publicizing their philanthropic efforts: the proliferation of the newspaper market, and the increased specialization that accompanied it had surely shifted the sources to which readers turned for information. It is also possible that the political events of 1790-1791 had created a new cultural climate that favored references to collective actions over letters venerating model individuals. Charitable activities were part of the role that clubs and sections played as well. Michael Kennedy has written on the role of Jacobin clubs in identifying the needy, collecting alms, and disbursing the funds. Clubs also set up committees to aid in disaster relief, public health, and the care of orphans and foundlings.\(^79\) Sections formed committees of bienfaisance on their own to address local needs.\(^80\) The National Assembly itself soon had a Committee on Subsistence and, later, on poverty. In short, the Revolution brought with it new institutions, which shifted the responsibility for and attention to beneficence to other venues.


Readers also continued to write letters on classics, literature and theater. Reviews of plays and letters by actors commenting on their craft were especially prevalent. Amongst letters on arts, belles lettres, and other learned subjects, there were rarely references to the works of great thinkers like Rousseau, Voltaire, or Montesquieu. Missives that did reference well-known philosophes comprised at most 1% of the letters published; this small minority of content devoted to such thinkers was consistent with the proportion of similar letters under the Old Regime. When writers did mention the philosophes, they tended to concern themselves with the minutiae within a particular work—the etymology of a particular term, or the accuracy of a date given in one of Voltaire’s histories—rather than exploring the larger social and political questions that preoccupied such works. In fact, readers seemed far less concerned with the ideas of the philosophes than with appreciating the celebrity of such men and women of le monde. For example, the minor philosophe, Gieussepppe Cerutti, wrote an angry letter in December 1789 condemning Rousseau’s Confessions for its ill treatment of d’Holbach.81 Later that month, a letter referencing an unpublished manuscript by Rousseau outlined the arrangements for its future publication in 1801, according to Rousseau’s will. At that time, he specified that “l’ouvrage sera lu avec l’attention & l’intérêt que doit inspirer une œuvre de J. J. Rousseau.” Once it has been published, the Abbé de Condillac, who was holding the document in the mean time, would ensure that it was deposited in a public library: “Tel sera le sort de manuscrit que J. J. Rousseau, trop célèbre & trop sensible pour que sa célébrité n’ait pas contribué à ses malheurs, a remis à M. l’Abbé de Condillac, a qui, plus d’une fois, M. le Maistre & moi avons entendu faire l’éloge & de l’Auteur son ami, & du manuscrit dont il avoit lu plusieurs passage pris au hasard.” The work in question seems to have been Rousseau’s “Les Dialogues.” Margaret

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81 Le Journal de Paris, October 16, 1789, 1325; Ibid., December 28, 1789, 1699-1700.
Woodbury has studied the arrangement between Condillac and Rousseau for its posthumous publication. Such letters that focused on the reputation of Rousseau and his adversaries, rather than on the content of his writings seem to underscore Antoine Lilti’s work on the culture of salons and celebrity at the end of the Old Regime. Such interest in celebrity was particularly underscored by a letter about visiting the home of Madame de Maintenon that spoke of the house which, “dans le beau siècle de Louis XIV [était] une Ecole d’esprit, de gout & de galanterie.” Curious for all the details, even the smallest things “qui peuvent avoir quelque rapport aux personnages qui se sont fait un nom célèbre,” this writer shared the home’s exact address. These elements of continuity reflected the diverse interests of the public, who continued to be curious about science, medicine, and the arts, even as the Revolution came to dominate the newspaper page.

CONCLUSION

The French Revolution was a period of tremendous political, social, and cultural transformation, and the writers who contributed letters to their local newspapers were by no means strangers to such dramatic changes. A number of Old Regime newspapers continued to provide a space for debate through the letters to the editor, at least until autumn 1791. To be sure, at first readers continued to write comments on the same wide range of subjects so typical of the Old Regime, expressing a spirit of optimism about the human capacity to comprehend the world, a desire to figure out social and intellectual puzzles, and a commitment to implementing change. But by 1790 this repertoire of subjects was changing rapidly. With the lifting of censorship, and

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84 *Journal de Paris*, April 29, 1789, 540-541.
the public fascination with current events, discussions of politics surged in the summer of 1789, and especially in 1790.

In Paris, the letters about politics were comprised of two major types—letters that provided reports on the proceedings of government institutions (a rather constant force throughout this period), and a subset of letters that provided commentary on such institutions. In the summer of 1789, letters tended to emphasize the chaos, lack of information, and confusion of the period. By the winter of 1789/90, more opinion pieces began to appear. Politics had by this point permeated daily life, and discussions of the Revolution were incorporated into letters on medicine, personal disputes, and advertisements. By the summer of 1791, the letters were starting to reveal the presence of factions; writers and publishers brought more discussion of policies into the paper, and references to the limitations or shortcomings of the Revolutionary government made their way into print. In short, between the summer of 1789 and the summer of 1791, readers had shifted from reacting to events that they witnessed as outside of their control, to critics of policies on which they believed their opinion mattered.

In the Provinces, political interests shifted from an attention to and support for the Revolution, (chiefly in the form of patriotic gift-giving) in fall 1789, to more regionally focused concerns about the impact of national policy changes upon local interests. This local preoccupation constituted the majority of such letters by January 1790, and it maintained the attention of most provincial political letters.

Letters to the editor reveal the divergent interests and responses of readers in Paris and in the provinces during the first years of the French Revolution. Published correspondence provided a locus for information sharing, critique, and debate through which readers could for the first time voice not only their opinions on commerce, medicine, bienfaisance, science, and
the arts, but also politics and current events. In the span of three years, the early information press that had once been a catchall publication on a range of subjects was transformed into a responsive space preoccupied above all with the events and politics of the moment.

Indeed, the gradual changes posited in Old Regime correspondence that suggested small, incremental steps to address material problems had now been replaced. While the Revolution was unimaginable for French men and women before it began, once it had happened, readers voiced their opinions, suggesting much more radical transformations. The habits of mind that the forum of letters to the editor had cultivated in the previous two decades equipped writers to imagine change and communicate it compellingly. The same self-confidence that had bolstered Old Regime responses to change in the form of scientific innovation, medical remedies, social projects, or public works, were now brought to bear on a much more massive scale. Once given the opportunity, writers spoke their opinions boldly, bringing their practical approach to a range of social problems that they now believed they could change.
Conclusion

The men and women who composed letters to their local newspaper were fond of defining the publication’s role in the life of their community. In 1777, a dentist named Catalan summed up the goals of le Journal de Paris as follows: “Exciter l’émulation, rendre justice au mérite, instruire le Public de découvertes utiles à l’humanité, telle est la loi que vous vous êtes imposé.”¹ Indeed, for many readers of the Parisian journaux and provincial affiches, the information press served as a venue for instruction, as a space for debate arbited by a responsive readership, and as a source of inspiration readers could emulate. All that was useful to humanity—scientific discoveries, effective remedies, or philanthropic projects—fit within the purview of the paper. References to popular science, medicine, and beneficence serve as a few vivid examples of this practical impulse that characterized the newspapers and the mentalités of the age.

Popular attitudes about scientific knowledge ranged from the spectacular to the banal, but what united them was the preoccupation in the minds of readers with the utility of innovation. Through case studies on ballooning, electricity, and popular medicine, the Enlightenment can be viewed not as a canon of certain philosophes’ texts, but instead as a psychology and epistemology about the capacity of humanity to change the world. The optimism conveyed in letters concerning scientific discovery stimulated public imagination, generating ideas about transforming society. Such ideas ranged from the practical to the zany, but the majority of the suggestions for improvement were incremental and attainable efforts to ameliorate the human condition. For example, using hot air balloons to scout the enemy’s military lines, implementing lightning rods to channel electricity away from homes and churches, or employing herbal

¹ Le Journal de Paris, December 6, 1777, 3.
remedies to alleviate respiratory maladies were some of the suggestions made by readers who observed the potential in a scientific breakthrough and sought to put it to work to improve people’s lives. University-educated practitioners, academicians, self-declared amateurs, local empiricists, and the occasional traveling salesman all penned letters on scientific and health-related topics. The papers’ multiple roles as a forum for debate and as an organ of the local market allowed for such overlap between letters concerned solely with discovery and those interested in the commercial benefits of innovation. The overwhelming focus of the letters on scientific subjects, the frequency of contributions written as responses to other missives, and the uncertainty about scientific findings all served to generate interest in popular science and medicine. Newspapers gave voice to the reading public’s fascination with cultural phenomena that were both spectacular and sensible, inventive and concrete.

Discussions of beneficence echoed readers’ concerns about implementing incremental reform to improve daily life. As one might anticipate, clergymen, doctors, intendants, and nobles often penned letters on philanthropic themes, and they were the frequent subjects of an anonymous letter about a beneficent act. Under the Old Regime, these groups were responsible for caring for the poor, the sick, the orphaned, and others in need, so it is little surprise that they would comprise a prominent portion of the newspaper content on social welfare. While such figures, in general, fit the historiography of the parties responsible for beneficent action, the content of the letters, themselves, revealed the complex and competing motivations for such action. Philanthropic projects were understood under two categories: that of charity and that of bienfaisance, which the historiography has tended to set in stark opposition to one another. Rather than revealing a sharp distinction between acts of charity and acts of bienfaisance, the majority of letters tended to use the terms interchangeably, blending the explanations for their
actions. Furthermore, the investigation into explanations for social welfare made by philanthropists shed light on the way eighteenth century readers conceived of social change. While transformation on the scale of the Revolution was inconceivable during the Old Regime, readers nevertheless undertook projects to ameliorate the conditions of daily life. Public service undertaken spontaneously by readers, i.e., to donate funds to a worthy cause, to help provide food, or to spread the word about a school for the disabled, lends important insight into the ways individuals sought to change Old Regime society through written critique and organized action.

Furthermore, it was especially significant that such ideas about incremental reform and practical innovation were shared across media platforms. Letters printed in a journal or affiches were picked up by editors of papers in other cities, who would then reprint the content. Using networks analysis to study such practices allows for a visualization of how information moved within the eighteenth century French press. Will Slauter’s work on this topic in the Atlantic world has illustrated the tremendous extent to which information was clipped from one newspaper and inserted in another. The editorial practice of excising information from other newspapers and inserting them into one’s own reveal that whether readers were explicitly aware of it or not, the local affiches in one’s town presented the reader with information throughout France, and in some rare instances throughout the Francophone world. Indeed, the eighteenth century reader did not read one publication in isolation, but was instead connected to an information network that directed information from the region, the capital, and occasionally abroad, to the subscriber of the provincial newspaper.

The impact of such ideas is particularly important because they were written by a rather diverse group of individuals. A prosopography of letters that indicated the writer’s profession

\[2\] Slauter, "The Paragraph as Information Technology."
revealed a diverse group of contributors. While missives tended to come predominantly from elites, especially the clergy, lawyers, government officials, and Academicians, letters also came from farmers, artisans, workers, and women. Students, writers, land owners, artisans, and men of commerce all appeared and were, in fact—by comparison with the work of Robert Darnton—substantially more likely to pen letters to the editor than to write books or pamphlets. 3 Jeremy Caradonna’s recent study of the provincial Académies’ essay contests has posited a similarly expansive public. Indeed, one of my major findings is that letters to the editor were a particularly inclusive venue for those who wanted to get into print, even more diverse than Darnton’s analysis of Grub Street writers or Caradonna’s evaluation of concours competitors. Those who penned letters to the editor were sometimes concerned with prestige, as were Darnton’s libellistes and Caradonna’s prize winners, but those who wrote a public letter varied more in their social status and their publishing aims. Certainly, some contributors were well-known writers, perhaps looking to augment their public image, but for many writers, prestige seemed to be less important than the relatively low costs of getting one’s ideas into print, which a letter to the editor afforded. In short, letter writers’ motivations were more varied than their book-publishing contemporaries—they sought to advertise, inform, debate, or question their fellow readers. Such an expansive group of men and women had an impact on the ideas that circulated amongst periodicals, and the tone of such missives was rather moderate. Letters encouraged thought, critique, and debate, to be sure, but the contributors and editors respected the authority of the Church and the state, eschewing controversial matter that could interrupt the privilege of the paper to publish, and with it the revenue the paper generated. The prosopography of those who wrote letters to the editor not only informs a vision of the

3 Darnton, "The Facts of Literary Life in Eighteenth Century France."
Enlightenment that such eighteenth century readers posited, but also the experience of revolution that they articulated.

Under the French Revolution, the tremendous experimentation in subject matter within the Old Regime press changed, as censorship restrictions and market monopolies disappeared. While the content of the newspapers continued to include letters on science, the arts, medicine, commerce, and beneficence, Revolutionary news began to shrink the amount of open space on the page that letters had previously occupied. Furthermore, letters concerning current events and politics also grew, depicting both the promise of Revolutionary transformation, and the trepidation of instability that a new social order brought with it. Between 1789 and 1791, political opinions evolved, and the political positions of the previously censored Old Regime press became more entrenched. By September 1791, the changing market conditions and political climate had transformed the press. The content of the letters to the editor had declined significantly, and debates on a range of topics petered out. It seems clear that the reading public grew increasingly polarized as they chose to read only those newspapers that aligned with their own political opinions. The image of the Revolution rendered by such letters is not a great surprise. Indeed, the material was more moderate, but so were the people writing the letters.

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Their preoccupations were practical. Once the Revolution had become the new social and political norm, such writers were able to weigh in, to conceive of change on a larger scale, and to think that it was possible to transform their world. Nevertheless, in general, they were not the radicals who often come to the fore in narratives of the Revolution.

What becomes clear from both the content of the letters and the prosopography of those who wrote them, is that letters to the editor formed an especially expansive site of eighteenth century knowledge production. It is also clear that this was not a radical venue. The average French person was not a d’Holbach or a Diderot. The reading and writing public who engaged in penning public letters to a local periodical were rather different than the Grub Street writers whom Darnton has studied. His work remains interesting and important, in part, because some of the Grub Street hacks became prominent revolutionaries. Their ideas were central to the Terror, and some of them were even deputies in the Convention or members of the Committee for Public Safety. They were prominent men, but they were radicals. In contrast, the study of letters to the editor provides an analog to this earlier work, but one that is more representative of the general public. This study presents a counterbalance to Darnton’s work: a group of writers that were just as—if not more—diverse, but whose opinions were much more representative of the average person’s point of view. If we zoom out from Grub Street to those contributors who wrote short missives to their newspaper, we find a rather different understanding of the Enlightenment, which was much more concerned with practical improvements to daily life than with the ideas of Voltaire or Rousseau. Indeed, as Caradonna and Roger Chartier have suggested, the very conceptualization of the Enlightenment is filtered through the French Revolution, whose
leaders were instrumental in defining an Enlightenment canon to legitimize the republican political agenda that they advocated.5

A reading of the letters published in the 1770s and 1780s reveals just how marginal the philosophes were to the thoughts of most eighteenth century readers. Writers were much more apt to comment on the latest opera by Gluck or Beaumarchais than to critique the writings of Voltaire and Rousseau. When the philosophes were occasionally mentioned, it was more often in terms of their celebrity than their critiques of the social structures of the Old Regime. The lack of centrality of the philosophes to the letters to the editor suggests that the content of the information circulated by the press is a critical contribution to the historiography of the Enlightenment. The subject matter of letters published in the affiches and journaux puts into question the very relevance of philosophes to literate French men and women. Indeed, such thinkers’ ideas were rarely cited in published correspondence. An analysis of the ideas that were popular at the time presented a rather different notion of the Enlightenment: motivated by a practical impulse and a tremendous optimism in the human capacity to incrementally improve society, and ameliorate the material conditions of daily life. Most letter writers believed that the necessary knowledge and tools existed to make life better, and all that remained was for them to solve the particular intellectual puzzle or social problem.

In general, the letters to the editor offered critiques and suggested improvements that were modest in nature. At least in part, such moderate demands may well have been a result of the Old Regime reality that the press was censored. Indeed, the interests of the editors who wanted to maintain their exclusive privileges to print inclined them toward a form of self-censorship of their newspaper’s content. Yet, if one compares the letters to the editor to other

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public spaces for written and published critique, the content of the letters does not look so different from other uncensored texts. For example, Sarah Maza’s study of *mémoires judiciaires* demonstrated that even the personal, private, and particular issue could engage public interest. The *mémoires judiciaires* she studied were published lawyer’s briefs that were distributed by various parties involved in a legal case to sway the public in their favor; furthermore, they were the only type of pamphlet that did not undergo any form of censorship prior to their publication. Maza has argued that such pamphlets were instrumental in engaging French readers together in shared concern about issues concerning private life and the political and social order. Maza’s case studies investigated court cases, which had higher stakes, and were more personal in nature than were letters to the editor. Nevertheless, she has demonstrated that the personal or trivial may nevertheless convey larger critiques about the social order.⁶

In a similar fashion, Jeremy Caradonna’s investigation of the Academie essay prize contests has emphasized a similar concern with practical change. Such *concours* invited uncensored contributions from a diverse public who wrote in on a range of subjects that were a mix of, as Caradonna put it, royal propaganda, technocratic exchange, philosophical debates and ruminations on social and political institutions under the Old Regime.⁷ Part of what is so interesting about the academie competitions was the plurality of perspectives that they solicited, on topics both controversial and banal. Both the *concours* and the *mémoires judiciaires* were uncensored writings written in the same decades as the letters to the editor. Furthermore, the topics with which the letters, the essays, and the pamphlets concerned themselves overlapped: they tended to be preoccupied with the personal or the practical.

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Beyond the public memoires and concours, studies of private correspondence have revealed a similar prevalence of practical or personal themes. For example, in his study of the correspondence of five future revolutionaries, Timothy Tackett has revealed that five men who would become adherents of the Jacobins gave little indication of their future radical political formation. While Tackett concedes that the mail was sometimes opened and read by the police and the government, he asserts that most letter writers acknowledged that surveillance was occasional, and not a source for concern. Indeed, he found the correspondents spoke rather candidly to the friends and family members to whom they wrote. In general, their correspondence was concerned with their personal lives and interests. They all expressed an interest in a practical enlightenment of sorts, through their interest in popular science, especially hot air balloon demonstrations and medical remedies. Furthermore, while they were interested in social reforms and scientific improvements, their letters conveyed their belief that large-scale change was impossible until the Revolution was well underway.8

This comparison of censored and uncensored materials suggests that letters to the editor touched on a set of societal questions that were reflected in the mentalités of French readers in other private and public texts too. Indeed, the censored letters to the editor described much the same practical impulse that preoccupied writers of uncensored letters, pamphlets, and essays. These texts shared a commitment to incremental changes that would ameliorate daily life.

Writing a public letter brought French men and women well acquainted with the domestic practice of writing a letter into a new, shared, public venue—a virtual forum that juxtaposed the opinions of trained practitioners, amateurs, and enthusiasts on the arts, sciences, medicine, and social welfare. No doubt, for many this was the first and only way that their

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8 Tackett, "Paths to Revolution: The Old Regime Correspondence of Five Future Revolutionaries."
opinions would appear in print. The act allowed individuals from a range of backgrounds to, borrowing Carla Hesse’s description, “separate [themselves] from their ideas, to take possession of them, and to exchange them with others across space and time.”\(^9\) It was both the practice of reflection and the act of writing that made them modern. What is so fascinating about the letters to the editor is that they allowed people to then see their ideas juxtaposed against the ideas of others—to witness their thoughts contested, critiqued, commended—by strangers who they might not otherwise meet. This sphere of virtual sociability was unique in the eighteenth century. Furthermore, that newspapers reprinted material from throughout the kingdom certainly made the idea of writing a public letter an expansive process, both in terms of the kinds of people and the kinds of places that would be exposed to their writing. Ideas traveled, connecting the reading and writing public in a network of exchange, and equipping readers with the habits of mind to imagine and articulate a different world.

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