The Writing Public

Bond, Elizabeth Andrews

Published by Cornell University Press

Bond, Elizabeth Andrews.
The Writing Public: Participatory Knowledge Production in Enlightenment and Revolutionary France.


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/83167

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2834835
Introduction

On February 12, 1786, a letter to the editor appeared in the *Affiches du Beauvaisis* that described how readers interacted with the newspaper. The anonymous writer explained to the editor, “Your weekly papers are a sort of literary arena, where every athlete should have the right to present oneself, to choose an adversary and to combat them, without however, straying from the bounds of decency and one’s public and private honesty.” He expressed his disagreement with a letter to the editor in the previous week’s newspaper, but he assured the editor that he intended only to combat his interlocutor in the press and to adhere to sociable norms of civility and honest conduct.\(^1\) Newspapers like the *Affiches du Beauvaisis* formed a collective space that invited participation. In conceptualizing the newspaper as an arena, this writer reflected a sense of the affiches as a site for the horizontal exchange of ideas where writers could grapple with new information and with one another.

While this writer addressed the *Affiches du Beauvaisis* in particular, his comments described an entire genre of general information newspapers commonly referred to by historians as “the information press,” which burgeoned in the 1770s and 1780s and persisted throughout the early years of the Revolution.\(^2\) Such newspapers shared two key characteristics—a capacious coverage of various subject matter and the publication of letters from their readers. The editors of both Parisian and provincial newspapers
expressed the same goal that this writer identified: to invite their readers into the conversation. Between 1770 and 1791, thousands of letters to the editor appeared in such newspapers, where writers participated in an iterative process of debate and exchange.

The newspapers that made up the information press proliferated after mid-century in Paris and in the provinces, where they appeared under such titles as *Affiches, annonces, et avis divers*, and were known generically as affiches. Such one-sheet in-folio newspapers soon appeared in dozens of French towns and cities, almost always on a weekly basis. Immediately following the front matter of the title and date, one could find a vast array of advertisements concerning services, property, and commodities, and then short articles covering all sorts of additional information. Featuring thousands of letters from their readers, the affiches were filled with fascinating and previously unstudied voices who had much to say about the society in which they lived.

Drawing on the letters to the affiches, my book traces the way that everyday readers participated in social and intellectual life from 1770 to 1789; an epilogue carries the story through the Revolution to the summer of 1791. Through the letters to the editor, the newspapers became a site for conversations about a range of pressing issues that readers confronted on science and medicine, economic and agricultural innovation, and social reform. Their conversations inform the historian not only about the proposed solutions, such as which particular crop to plant, how to navigate a hot-air balloon, or which medicinal remedy was deemed best. They also provide unique insight into the manner in which people read, communicated, and applied the new knowledge that was unquestionably being generated in the “century of Enlightenment.” Such sources reveal the extent to which the shifting rational and emotional epistemologies associated with eighteenth-century life reached a diverse group of individuals who adapted such repertoires for their own purposes. They show how the exchanges between readers shaped changes in social habits and facilitated the formation of a public opinion in an era of dramatically accelerating change.

The affiches’ letters to the editor form the heart of my study, because they capture the public’s response to the new ideas they consumed. With the exception of historians of eighteenth-century French consumer culture who have drawn from the affiches’ advertisements, these papers have tended to be overlooked in the cultural history of the eighteenth century. For a long time, scholars of Old Regime and revolutionary France were most interested in answering the question of how politicized public opinion was by 1789. Because the affiches eschewed explicitly political criticism
or commentary concerning church or state, they received far less attention in the cultural histories of the period than the clandestine and uncensored periodicals that were more philosophical and radical in nature. But recently cultural historians have questioned the extent to which the coming of the Revolution was obvious to the general reading public, or even to the deputies who would lead the Revolution. Researchers working on the eighteenth century are increasingly seeking to understand instead the importance of lived experience and the role played by contingency in the years leading up to the calling of the Estates General. With this shift, the role of communication, rumor, conspiracy, and truth have become primary concerns for historians of both the Old Regime and the Revolution. Letters from readers published in the affiches speak to this new scholarly concern with communication in late eighteenth-century life in original and significant ways. In sum, the affiches and the letters they contain merit fresh investigation.

Letters to the editor offer unique insight on pressing questions for historians, because their writers revealed who participated in them, what print matter they discussed, and what claims to authority were convincing to their readers. First, the signatures enclosed in the letters reveal a writing public with complex—and at times competing—interests who participated in the press. Identifying and counting who composed letters to the editor has an enormous advantage to the historian: it foregrounds the presence of otherwise marginalized voices in the history of ideas. Second, the mention in the letters of books and periodicals sheds new light on the print matter that readers consumed, critiqued, and valued. By attending to the works that informed their writing, the correspondence can reveal how Parisian and provincial readers accessed both clandestine and licensed works in France before the Revolution, and how the newspaper acted as a bridge through which readers shared the print matter they encountered. Finally, the letters are significant for the arguments that the writers made in them.

Based on an investigation of nearly seven thousand letters to the editor published in twenty-two Parisian and provincial affiches, I argue that newspapers fostered an interactive sphere where people could express opinions and invite responses on questions that mattered to them. They took each other seriously, responded to one another, and proposed and implemented reform. For many, the adoption of new ideas in the late eighteenth century came out of an iterative process of debate and exchange worked out in newspapers throughout the kingdom. Letters to the editor constituted a space for social learning, where writers engaged with one another’s ideas as much as they did with other books. Their correspondence underscores that writers
INTRODUCTION

learned from one another, rather than from a top-down intellectual movement. Through their debates, writers and editors positioned the affiches as a site for reform-minded conversations.

The exchange of ideas about practical matters refashioned subjectivities and the public sphere itself. My book examines how writers negotiated a new sphere of virtual sociability in which they did not know their interlocutors. Writers had to make their case to the editors and to the newspaper’s readers, and to evaluate competing claims made by other writers. In many instances, the editors were reluctant to step forward as arbiters, and the readers were left to evaluate what they read for themselves. It was around unsettled questions that the letters to the editor flourished. In this flourishing there lay a tension between the rich participation of diverse voices and the desire in the letters for information that was tested, true, and useful. Multiple possibilities emerged as more voices entered the forum the newspapers had opened. The negotiation evident in the press was foundational to the formation of civil society at the end of the Old Regime and in the early years of the Revolution.

Whatever the subject matter, writers began their correspondence by explaining why the editor ought to publish their letters. The most recurring explanation was that the affiches were the site where all practical knowledge that might inform and entertain readers ought to be gathered. Above all, they argued, their letter should be published because the information it contained was useful. For historians, their arguments are significant because they show how readers thought about the role of the press in Old Regime and revolutionary public life, and how they fashioned their own correspondence in response to such aims.

Addressing a public letter to a newspaper brought men and women well acquainted with domestic epistolary practices into a new, shared, and public venue—a forum that juxtaposed the thoughts of trained practitioners, amateurs, and enthusiasts concerning the arts, sciences, and social welfare. For many, a letter to the editor was the first and only way that their opinions would appear in print. The act allowed individuals from a range of backgrounds to articulate and share their views across the geographic and social space that otherwise separated them from other readers. It also necessitated new strategies for making a case before readers whose professions and positions in society differed from one’s own. The practice of reflection took on new dimension as writers saw their own ideas in print before them. Letters to the editor allowed people to see their opinions juxtaposed against the ideas of others—to witness their thoughts contested, critiqued, and commended—by strangers they might not otherwise meet. Taken together, the letters expose just how widely shared
new empirical and emotional epistemologies actually were, and how, through an innovative media form, readers debated, instructed, and learned from one another.

The Public Letter and Self-Fashioning

By studying the opinions of the letter writers living in the two decades before the French Revolution, my book provides fresh understanding of the ways that eighteenth-century readers responded to new ideas, and the role of the press in spreading such information. In addition to enabling a wide cross-section of literate society to participate in public debate, writing a letter to the editor also entailed a very personal dimension: a veritable assertion of the self. In sending letters to the editor, writers defined who they were and why their letters merited publication. In doing so they had to articulate their own subjectivity. Because writing a letter to the editor hinged the personal and the public, the letters in the affiches speak to the process of self-fashioning in a way that few other sources from this period can.

Historians have already extensively mined individual diaries, private correspondence, wills, and book catalogs for their perspectives on the experiences of individual figures and families living in the eighteenth century. However, analyzing a corpus of public correspondence in which readers from various backgrounds living in the 1770s and 1780s—figures whose thoughts and ideas might otherwise never have appeared in print—has a different advantage. It offers a way to assess on a much larger scale the popular reception of the new media of the late eighteenth century—the letter to the editor—and the role these media played in the formation of public opinion. In the press, thousands of writers pushed against the boundaries of authorship. At its heart, my book demonstrates how the spread of both new ideas and new communication technology intersected to shape French society at a critical moment in history.

The eighteenth century was, in a sense, a golden age of correspondence. Private correspondence among family, friends, and colleagues has been shown to offer an exceptional touchstone for the thoughts and ideas articulated by literate members of society. Epistolary practice shaped daily life, secured social ties, and oriented the writer’s place within the wider world. For the transitional period from the Old Regime to the French Revolution, private correspondence has underscored the contingency of individual responses to political and social change, change that was largely unanticipated even among future revolutionaries.
By contrast, I consider how public letters fit within this genre, asking whether there was something fundamentally different about writing a letter to the editor. The Encyclopedists certainly made such a distinction. They defined the lettre missive as a personal, intimate letter meant to be kept private; sharing lettres missives with a third party was considered a breach of trust. But they also recognized the lettre circulaire, addressed to many people who had a shared interest in the letter’s contents. The philosophes wrote open letters with the intention that they would be shared and read aloud, and in some cases published. As Dena Goodman has argued, philosophes used such letters to bridge the divide between the salon and the public beyond, and to communicate new ideas. Moreover, the “epistolary commerce” of reading a letter—even a public one—required reciprocity. Readers were obliged to respond, prompting a social habit.

The motives of those who wrote open letters for the affiches were more varied than were the open letters of the philosophes. Writers to the affiches sought to share information; to galvanize support for their cause; to advertise a product to inquisitive readers of means; to ask a question of a public that might have more information; or to counter the position of a previous letter to the editor. In all cases, however, the first goal was to convince the editor that their letter was worth sharing. The grounds on which prospective contributors justified the merits of their letters and their authority to speak are among the most revealing findings of my book.

In considering writing a public letter as an act of self-fashioning, my work is informed by histories of authorship and gender. In her study of women authors in the eighteenth century, Carla Hesse has emphasized that it was precisely self-reflexivity, mediated through writing—and for which literacy was essential—that made one modern. Dena Goodman has demonstrated that it was through the very process of composing letters that eighteenth-century women came to understand themselves both as private persons and as women—and these self-definitions were made (and are always made) vis-à-vis a public sphere. So too for contributors to the affiches, letter writing was an important means of articulating who they were and defining their relationship to the public. Writing a letter to the editor was simultaneously a personal and a public act.

By examining for the first time the affiches’ public letters, I seek to break new ground in three of the longest-running debates among historians of the eighteenth century: first, that of the composition, timing, and extent of what has come to be routinely referred to as “the public”; second, the creation of a new sense of community thanks to the spread of newspapers;
and third, the ways in which what are conventionally called Enlightenment ideas permeated society.

**Reconsidering the Public Sphere**

The first contribution of my book is to offer a fresh analysis of the relevance of the “public sphere” that has generated much debate in eighteenth-century scholarship. As writers situated their letters before a public audience, they drew on repertoires that were rational, experiential, emotional, and social. Many writers made evidence-based arguments that emphasized and celebrated empiricism. They compared the results of their investigations with the contentions of others, and they took each other to task over errors they found in other letters. For them, the affiches were a collection of useful knowledge. But the space of the affiches was also affective. The most frequently reprinted letters picked up by multiple newspapers encouraged emotional responses to faithful dogs or daring rescues. The space generated by the newspapers also possessed a commercial side. It was, after all, consumer culture and the publication of advertisements that initially made the affiches possible. Some writers called on readers to buy French goods, or to examine botanical samples from the colonies; in so doing they situated Parisian and provincial readers within the nation and the empire. But for the majority of letter writers who sold nothing, the affiches were a way of shoring up one’s authority and presenting one’s civic engagement. In sum, a combination of rational, affective, commercial, and social interests of letter writers and editors shaped the formation of “public opinion” in the late Old Regime and the first years of the Revolution. While readers seldom spoke of themselves as a public per se, they did discuss what was best for the public good, and what a good citizen ought to do. The social conscience of the letters was always in evidence.

In studying the influence of the eighteenth-century press, Jürgen Habermas’s 1962 classic formulation of *Öffentlichkeit*, commonly translated as “the public sphere,” remains an influential model. Habermas envisioned a public sphere in which individual, private members of elite society with the education and resources to read and the time to reflect on what they read came together to participate in rational conversation. Through such interactions they developed critical reason, which they tried out first in print and later in politics. Print culture and the public sphere grew concomitantly after mid-century. Access to books and other print media rose dramatically, and literacy rates increased, especially among those living in urban centers. Habermas’s model of the public sphere has remained salient in part because what we know about literacy and book publishing seems to reinforce its general contours.
In the decades since the English translation of Habermas’s landmark work, historians have challenged the location, timing, and actors who shaped the formation of such a public sphere. While Habermas located his Öffentlichkeit primarily in eighteenth-century Britain, France, and Germany, historians have applied his model to the study of public life and participation throughout the world. Without a doubt, the rise of the public sphere was not just a European phenomenon. In France, historians have also identified antecedents as early as the thirteenth century. Even in eighteenth-century France, the public sphere was not the bourgeois world of a small, elite circle of private men that Habermas envisioned. The very category of the “bourgeoisie,” how it was formed, what the name signified, and whether it existed at all, have been substantially reconsidered.

Some historians have suggested it is best to set aside the social composition of the reading public. For them, “the public” is best understood as a normative concept that could be used by men of letters for political purposes, not as a group whose sociology mattered. Others have argued for conceiving “the public” not only as a rhetorical concept but also as a communication network that reacted to theatrical works, literary fiction, and news reports. Nor was such communication as separate from the state as Habermas had proposed; many of the people who shaped public opinion and participated in politics in the eighteenth century held public offices from which they implemented reform. And the popular classes had repertoires for the expression of public opinion that were original and significant on their own terms. Moreover, historians of the eighteenth century have convincingly demonstrated that the boundaries between public and private life that Habermas envisioned were not opposed to one another, but rather were permeable and overlapping arenas. Habermas’s public sphere is a model, a kind of Weberian ideal type, that has proven useful to think with, even as historians have shown that the unified, rational, elite public opinion that Habermas envisioned never indeed existed.

Despite the limits of Habermas’s model, the question that he originally raised about the impact of print culture on the formation of public opinion, including its radicalization in the 1780s, has remained central to the cultural history of the eighteenth century. Robert Darnton’s foundational study of Grub Street writers emphasized the difficulties of making a living as a writer in the eighteenth century. Shut out of Old Regime patronage networks, would-be philosophes survived by writing nouvelles à la main and other works of questionable quality. Darnton suggested that the Grub Street denizens became radical revolutionaries because of their years of professional marginalization. Roger Chartier likewise argued for the primacy of print culture in
shaping the course of the Revolution, but he emphasized the new patterns of thought that the practice of reading encouraged. For him it was not the particular ideas of Grub Street writers that made the Revolution but rather the creative, dynamic process of reading that prepared the revolutionaries to participate in politics.27

In recent years, historians have emphasized that looking to sources that engaged a wider audience shifts the social composition of the public sphere in meaningful ways. The writers who participated in essay prize competitions held by the French academies experienced a particularly democratic space for intellectual exchange in Old Regime France. Because each essay was anonymized prior to judging, Jeremy Caradonna has argued, it was above all the merits of one’s ideas that shone through. Even farmers participated in such competitions, although they did not win.28 In a similar manner, Lauren Clay has shown that theaters in Paris, the provinces, and the colonies reflected the wide-ranging character and consumer orientation of the public sphere.29 The work of such scholars largely confirms what Harvey Chisick has underscored: “Ideas do not exist independently from people or groups of people who bear and articulate them. Any consideration of the social or political bases of public opinion shows this opinion to be divided, particular, interested and contestatory.”30

As my book makes clear, to look carefully at public opinion is to glimpse particular interests. Appeals to the general public in the press may be read as the attempts by individual persons to claim authority. In looking to the affiches for the formation of public opinion, the public who read such newspapers emerges not as a homogeneous and singular entity but a range of dynamic and differentiated figures who found in the newspaper a new space for debate. I contend that the social composition of the writers is crucial to an understanding of the interests and aspirations they espoused. The letters to the editor that appeared in the affiches constituted a space in which individual writers from different social backgrounds debated shared concerns, situating the letters to the editor as a uniquely open and richly peopled sphere for discussion.

The Newspaper and Community

My book further contributes to our understanding of how modern newspapers helped create community. Through the very act of reading, the readers of public letters became part of an imagined group who shared their habits of newspaper consumption. Such ties were especially vivid and strong for the affiches’ readers because their fellow readers wrote back. In corresponding
via the newspaper, writers to the affiches enacted new habits of mind and new formulations of community. The letters published in the information press illustrate how practices of sociability were formulated by a much larger circle of figures. Their letters did not elide social difference, but they invited into the conversation writers who could not otherwise access elite salons, coffeehouses, or learned societies. In doing so, they adopted shared practices for sharing new and practical knowledge.

As Benedict Anderson famously argued, the experience of reading the newspaper transformed the way eighteenth-century readers thought about one another, prompting them to consider entirely new relationships in their lives. The juxtaposition of news from one’s town, the capital, and other parts of the world made local, regional, and global ties visible and personal. Even when one read the newspaper alone in one’s home, the act of newspaper reading brought people engaged in the same practice into an “imagined community.” Such an experience may also have created empathy for the people they read about. Lynn Hunt has argued that the social and legal reforms of the late Old Regime and especially the Revolution were only possible because of the empathy that individuals felt as they read epistolary novels. Reading and contributing to newspapers have been equally as important in forging affective ties between readers who were otherwise strangers.

In the cultural history of the eighteenth century, the study of social relations is understood through the lens of sociability, as both a way of studying social relationships and a particular idea in the moral and political philosophy of the eighteenth century. In a general sense, sociability is a shared set of practices that enable a group of individuals to relate to one another, when participation in that group is voluntary. For French historians, Maurice Agulhon’s study of eighteenth-century Provence was foundational. Agulhon described sociability as a dynamic process: participants adhered to certain norms for interaction, but they also learned from one another, and in doing so they revised and adapted social practices. While early scholarship on sociability primarily concerned politics, historians have since emphasized the significance of sociability for the republic of letters. Their work underscored that even as hierarchies and inequalities persisted until 1789, practices of sociability enabled French authors and playwrights to create a new and creative space for themselves “that was neither democratic nor absolutist.” Social relationships, correspondence, discussion, and friendship grew increasingly crucial to knowledge production in the eighteenth century.

While the affiches did not discuss the philosophy of sociability in their letters to the editor, they did enact sociable practices that mirrored the general
sense in which their contemporaries characterized it. In his article to the *Encyclopédie*, Louis de Jaucourt defined *sociabilité* as an attitude of generosity and kindness toward one’s interlocutors, a reciprocal obligation to others, and a commitment to that which was useful. It was especially in terms of their desire to be useful that writers made their cases in the information press.

**Practicing the Enlightenment**

My book also contributes to the history of the Enlightenment as it was experienced by a diverse community of writers. From the vantage point of the affiches, the Enlightenment was an approach to knowledge production that was, above all, practical and useful. Most of the writers to the information press did not oppose the philosophes, though in most cases they also did not directly mention them. Nevertheless, their writing shared with many eighteenth-century savants a sense of self-confidence and optimism about the age. Their letters reflected the feeling that they lived in a unique moment where progress in the sciences and the conditions of everyday life were attainable. Through their correspondence, they took it upon themselves to participate in that amelioration.

My book engages with the historiography of the Enlightenment in two key ways. First, I take up Clifford Siskin and William Warner’s call to consider the Enlightenment as a history of mediation. In doing so, I highlight how writing, reading, and print informed one another. I also seek to convey a history of how ideas were shared and proliferated, and how such transmission shaped new forms of social interaction and practice. While many letter writers contextualized what they were doing as collaborative or useful to the public good, the forum of letters to the editor, like the Enlightenment itself, was a terrain of contestation. The forms of social interaction forged in the press equipped writers to participate in such debates.

Second, the book engages with Jeremy Caradonna’s description of the Enlightenment being understood “as something that people did or practiced, rather than some specific set of beliefs or philosophical assumptions (even though these practices have obvious links to philosophical attitudes).” By focusing on cultural practices, and considering the sites in which such knowledge was produced, my book underlines the ways in which the information press fostered a critical sphere of public exchange. Inspired by the work of Margaret C. Jacob, Jeremy Caradonna, Charles Withers, and others, it explores how a wide array of figures “lived” the Enlightenment. My analysis of the letters to the editor of a broad group of eighteenth-century men
and women calls attention to an important phenomenon that remains relatively understudied in the cultural history of the Enlightenment: how the emergence of the letter to the editor, a particularly novel form of communication, facilitated and shaped public participation in French intellectual life.

There is no question that the men and women who wrote letters to the affiches made references to living in a “siècle éclairé,” and of spreading “les lumières” through their writing. But while they spoke with some frequency of practicing or sharing “lumières,” they almost never explicitly defined what they meant by an “enlightened” age. In fact, the Enlightenment has been a complex and contested classification since the eighteenth century itself, and its study remains inextricably tied to the generations of literary critics, philosophers, and historians who have written about it from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries. Scholarly conversations over the nature of the Enlightenment and the scope of its participants have shaped much of the historiography in this field. 42 Especially since the 1970s, research on the Enlightenment has burgeoned, as historians have considered the ideas that European intellectuals debated in the long eighteenth century. J. G. A. Pocock has developed an interpretation based on the concept of plural “enlightenments” to capture the range and variety of such intellectual currents. 43 And various scholars since have proposed and explored the existence of the Religious Enlightenment, the Secular Enlightenment, the Radical Enlightenment, the Counter-Enlightenment, the Pragmatic Enlightenment, the Artisanal Enlightenment, and the Scientific Enlightenment, in all of its European, Atlantic, and global contexts. 44 Jeffrey Burson, by contrast, has argued against the proliferation of enlightenments and suggested instead that historians consider the Enlightenment “as plurality within an unfolding continuum, as process rather than atomistic, reified, hypostatic Enlighten-
ments.” 45 Other historians would go further still, arguing that the Enlightenment is largely a heuristic device, framed by historiography, informed by an evolving body of sources and historical perspectives. 46 In their varied interpretations of what it meant to live in an age of lights, the writers to the affiches mirrored the divergent perspectives within this scholarly field.

Methodology

The predominant methodological approach throughout my book is the close reading of 6,909 letters to the editor published in provincial and Parisian newspapers. This rich body of sources enables analysis that attends to the limits of sources for which few manuscript or archival records remain. Such limitations inform the approach I have taken to interpret the sources.
In doing so, my work is informed by the digital turn in the humanities, which has prompted questions about how computational research methods and large bodies of sources can increase our sensitivity to those social or gender groups too often excluded. In some cases when digitized corpora were available, digital humanists have been able to track down anonymous authors, rendering women’s role in authoring eighteenth-century works more visible. While some of the tools they use differ from my own, their work has centered historical questions about the construction of archives and how historians study those people for whom few records remain. Digital history scholarship involves attending to the limits and inequities of archival records. By studying the contributions of anonymous writers alongside the work of known authors, it is another ambition of my book to write a social history of ideas that engages with marginalized voices. Combining close reading with a quantitative analysis of the writers shows how the writers’ social context informed their modes of self-expression.

Within digital humanities, network analysis is a particularly apt method for studying the relationships between periodicals. Network analysis is the study of the structure of social relationships. Such networks take many forms, but every network consists of individuals known as nodes and the ties that connect them with one another. In adopting this method to study the information-sharing relationships between newspapers, I am joining a number of historians who in recent years have used network analysis to illuminate the structures through which relationships were formed, ideas were spread, and values were shared in the early modern period. Thus, network analysis has served as an apt approach to examine the impact of marriage and social mobility in Renaissance Florence. It has likewise served as a useful way of conceptualizing those who fit within and fell outside a self-referential “Republic of Letters.” Emma Rothschild employed a similar technique to explore the relationships between global commerce and the interior economy of eighteenth-century Angoulême, while at the same time considering the impact of such trends on individual lives. The quantitative approach in my book participates in the kind of work that Rothschild has done in her economic history of Angoulême: to write a history of information that begins with individuals in the provinces and their local circumstances, and then to trace the larger system in which even isolated figures who left scant written records participated.

**The Structure of the Book**

The book begins with the advent of the affiches in the 1770s, traces the participation of letter writers in their rise and evolution under the late Old
Regime and the Revolution, and then ends in late summer 1791 as the letters began to fade from the newspapers. For the writers of the affiches, the habits of mind formed in the late Old Regime would shape their revolutionary experience.

The first chapter examines the production, regulation, and distribution of the affiches, likely the most widely read domestically produced newspapers in Old Regime France. This chapter traces how the content of the newspapers was shaped by the editors in each town, a complex web of state licensing and censorship, and by the postal system that delivered the periodicals. In doing so, chapter 1 considers how the production of such sources informs the questions that guide this book.

Chapter 2 turns to the letters to the editor published in the affiches, and in particular to their authors. Using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, this chapter identifies the startling diversity of those who wrote to the information press. And while nearly half of the writers indicated who they were, many writers obscured their identities. This chapter limns what the historian can know about who the authors were and what the forms of self-presentation in the letters communicated. Writers exercised a range of approaches to self-fashioning that were shaped by the simultaneously public and personal act of writing a public letter.

Chapter 3 situates the affiches within a larger information context by examining how the letter writers interacted with print. A quantitative investigation of the books and newspapers that readers cited underscores the capacious interests of the newspaper-reading public. Writers engaged with some of the most celebrated savants of the eighteenth century, but their letters also highlighted the persistent influence of writers from the seventeenth century and antiquity. A close reading of the sources reveals that letter writers used the newspaper to reflect on many modes of reading, but above all, they used the affiches to practice reading together.

Chapter 4 investigates two scientific spectacles of the 1780s—hot-air balloons and electricity—that were covered regularly in the information press. Savants and amateurs alike wrote letters to share the experiments they had carried out. For savants, letters on ballooning and electricity afforded an opportunity to garner widespread support for scientific work. And yet once their letters appeared in the press, they found that the uses that other writers made of their findings were difficult to control. As they shared their conclusions, posed questions, and contested results in the press, writers devised strategies for situating their authority around unsettled scientific questions.
Chapter 5 concentrates on the avid participation in the affiches around agricultural reform. Agronomists and farmers alike used the newspaper to communicate new techniques and to convince other readers. Like the debates in chapter 4, letters concerning agriculture generated widespread interest in experimentation; what set them apart was their ability to encourage the implementation of new practices. By privileging material results worked out on one’s own land, such letters emphasized know-how based on experience. They also cultivated a style of journalism in which anecdotes and facts described as self-evident became particularly powerful rhetorical strategies. Writers made cases to the paper based on a desire to be useful to society and to position the affiches as the repository for useful knowledge. In doing so, they opened up possibilities of who could speak with authority in the press.

While writers advocated reform in one another’s fields and pastures, collective action was most evident in the letters to the editor that concerned the practice of philanthropy known as *bienfaisance*: the single most popular topic that letters to the editor addressed. Chapter 6 shows that when it came to social welfare, letter writers negotiated reform via the press at a wide scale. Communicating about bienfaisance afforded more writers—including some figures who did not write on other subject matter—a means to participate in the press. It was in the letters to the editor on bienfaisance that marginal figures became agents in their own stories.

The habits of mind that letter writers had practiced over the previous two decades would soon be put to new and unanticipated uses during the Revolution. Chapter 7 traces the information press during the first three years of the French Revolution. The end of Old Regime censorship and licensing presented newfound opportunities for writers to communicate directly about revolutionary politics. The affiches were integral to that collective political education, as writers used their letters to interpret the political events in which they participated, and deputies to the National Assembly used letters to the editor to communicate with their constituents. At the same time, the affiches continued to publish letters about the wide range of issues that had characterized the information press of the 1770s and 1780s. Such continuities underscore the ways in which the habits of mind fostered by writing a letter to the editor persisted and adapted into the early years of the Revolution.

While people participated in the Enlightenment in all manner of collective and active endeavors, the conclusion argues that writing a letter to the editor differed meaningfully from other kinds of participation. It required
time and consideration. Writing a letter to the editor relied on the writer’s assumption that other people would want to read what she or he had to say. Moreover, a letter to the editor reflected a desire to be a part of a public conversation. Writers’ claims were affective and material, as well as instructive and civic-minded. People took their contributions to the newspaper so seriously because the issues they addressed impinged on their own lives. Such participation was only possible in the media landscape that emerged in the last decades of the eighteenth century.