Chapter 2

The Writers, Self-Presentation, and Subjectivity

On March 3, 1780, Siméon-Prosper Hardy wrote in his diary that he had published a letter to the editor in the Parisian daily newspaper the Journal de Paris. Hardy’s letter discussed the establishment of a hospice for the poor in the parish of Saint Jacques du Haut Pas, near the Jardin du Luxembourg, and he had asked the Parisian daily to publish his comments. In his diary Hardy transcribed a copy of the letter along with an explanation of just how the letter had come to appear in the paper. Hardy’s neighbor, the engraver Charles-Étienne Gaucher, knew the editors of the Journal.1 Gaucher ensured that Hardy’s correspondence received attention from the editors; the letter appeared in print, signed with Hardy’s initials, on March 10. In some ways Hardy’s story was unique. As a bookseller he was well acquainted with the printing industry and those who worked within it. Moreover, Hardy and his milieu are well known today because of his unusual practice of keeping a diary over four decades from 1753 to 1789, which grew to eight manuscript volumes. And yet, in writing a letter to his local newspaper Hardy was not so exceptional. In the 1770s and 1780s thousands of letters written by readers and subscribers appeared in the Parisian and provincial press.

Writing letters was a popular—even ubiquitous—activity among the literate in eighteenth-century France. The epistolary form was the basis for popular novels, especially best sellers such as Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa,
or the History of a Young Lady and Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse. Letter-writing manuals were sources of both instruction and entertainment; volumes directed toward young people and women of various social stations reflected this dual purpose. Letters moved the plot forward in several works performed at the Opéra-Comique. Paintings and engravings depicted the act of reading or writing a letter. And a consumer industry accompanied epistolary practices: the desk, papers, ink, and pens all situated the letter writer in relation not only to the recipient of the letter but to the market and to le monde. Correspondence across vast distances secured emotional bonds between family and close friends and undergirded the commercial and political success of family networks. The degree of sentiment, the frequency of correspondence, and the adaptation of one’s style from formal language to local dialect all served as modes of conveying one’s intimacy with the recipient of the letter.

Letter writing played a profound role in cultural and daily life and in structuring social networks. In addition to writing private letters intended for family, friends, and colleagues, some men and women wrote public letters intended for a wider audience. In the 1770s the information press began publishing letters from readers in their weekly papers. By the eve of the French Revolution, letters to the editor routinely appeared in provincial and Parisian affiches. The analysis in this chapter includes all letters to the editor published from 1770 through 1788 in the Parisian information press, the Journal de Paris and the Journal général de France, and in provincial affiches in Aix-en-Provence, Amiens, Angers, Arras, Bordeaux, Caen, Compiègne, Dijon, Grenoble, Lyon, Marseille, Metz, Montpellier, Orléans, Poitiers, Reims, Rennes, Rouen, Toulouse, and Troyes.

Writing a public letter to the newspaper certainly differed from writing a private missive to a friend or family member; writers to the paper could not assume privacy, nor could they rely on a rapport formed through interpersonal interactions. And yet, as discussed in the introduction, those who wrote public letters did rely on a certain reciprocity from their audience. Writers to the affiches used their opening and concluding remarks to invite the newspaper’s editor and readers to consider their opinion and to respond, by writing back or trying out the suggestions they had made. Letters to the editor also afforded writers a means of conveying themselves in transparent and in masked forms. Their correspondence prompted affective and social expectations for the writer and for the readers of such letters.

Signatures made by the writers themselves allow the historian to reconstruct a partial prosopography of the periodical reading public during the last decades of the Old Regime. Within the 6,909 letters examined in this book, half (50.2 percent) of all published letters were signed, and 37.5 percent of the letters indicated the author’s profession or social position. The variation
in signature styles did not emerge all at once. In the affiches’ early years of publication, most letters were published without a signature, or at most with initials. The trend changed by 1775, when signed letters became the most prevalent signature type. Figure 2.1 shows the signature styles that letter writers adopted over time.

The most common style was to sign one’s letter with a name. The next most popular approach was to offer no name at all. Writers also identified themselves by their initials, a pseudonym, or simply as “un/e abonné/e” (a subscriber). By describing oneself as a subscriber, the writer indicated that he or she played a role in the commercial success of the newspaper and that the editor ought to pay attention to their comments. Figure 2.1 treats all letters published across the kingdom, but the proportions of signature styles were similar in Parisian and provincial newspapers. Signed letters constituted 51.5 percent of the letters published in the Parisian newspapers and 47.8 percent of the letters published in provincial newspapers.9

**Figure 2.1** Letters published in Parisian and provincial affiches, 1770–1788, by signature type.
Table 2.1 traces the proportion of writers who signed one, two, three to five, six to ten, or more than ten letters to the editor. Some of the signatures that writers adopted consisted of abbreviated names such as the “Abbé de St. L***” or only of one’s initials, such as ‘A . . .’ To account for the possibility that multiple authors may have used the same initials, all abbreviated or initialed names were tagged as ambiguous signatures. The second column in the table includes such names in the calculation. The third column excludes all of the initialed and abbreviated names from the analysis. In both cases, the proportion of writers within each category is strikingly similar, which suggests that the pattern of the number of letters written by a given author is not sensitive to the inclusion of ambiguous authors in the analysis.

Among the signed letters, the vast majority of writers had only one letter to the editor published. Approximately 22 percent published two to five letters in the affiches, and 3 percent wrote between six and ten letters. Although there were some serial contributors who wrote numerous letters to the editor, they constituted a small proportion of the letter writers. Less than 2 percent of all the writers published more than ten letters. Rather than representing the work of a small group, the forum of letters to the editor favored many unique contributors.

Identifying as many of the writers as possible involved a process of recording and interpreting the signatures. The first step was to record three distinct elements from each signature: the name, the social position, and the profession exactly as they were printed in each letter. Some letters included only a name, or only a description of the author’s profession. Once all three elements of the signature were recorded, each letter was classified by the signature, social position, and profession according to a standardized schema.  

Next, the names given in the signature were categorized into five groups: signed, unsigned, initialed, signed with a pseudonym, and signed “un/e abonné/e” (a subscriber). The names were also disambiguated from similar names in the paper. All letters signed with a name, pen name, or initials were

Table 2.1  The number of signed letters published in the affiches by each writer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER OF LETTERS SIGNED BY AN AUTHOR</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF ALL WRITERS (INCLUDING AMBIGUOUS SIGNATURES)</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF ALL WRITERS (NOT INCLUDING AMBIGUOUS SIGNATURES)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>73.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>12.9</td>
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<td>3–5</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>9.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>6–10</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11+</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
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assigned a disambiguation name to account for variations in publishing practices, such as typos, or the editorial decisions to include or exclude titles such as M., Mme., Fr., and Abbé, or the credentials for a given writer. For example, even in the same year in the same newspaper, letters by Henri-Alexandre Tessier appeared under both the signature “l’Abbé Tessier, Docteur-Régent de la Faculté & de la Société de Médecine” and simply as “l’Abbé Tessier.” The signature was first recorded as it appeared in each particular letter; all such letters were also assigned the disambiguation name “Tessier” to ensure that all of his letters were examined together.

Each signature style afforded the writer certain benefits of revealing or obscuring who they were. The approach taken in this book acknowledges the limits of identifying all of the men and women who participated in writing letters to the editor based on their signatures. Some writers likely exaggerated their status in hopes it would increase their chances of publication. Others wished to portray themselves as an everyman when they were in fact a well-known savant. Condorcet, for example, adopted an anonymous and humble persona in his letters to the Journal de Paris. And as the example of Hardy at the beginning of the chapter makes clear, even known figures sometimes concealed their identities. Moreover, some writers wrote anonymously more than others; it is likely that this was especially the case for women navigating the gendered social contexts within which they wrote. Despite the limitations of the sources for identifying the exact proportions of letter writers from a given social position, the letters do reveal the interests of writers from a wide array of social and professional contexts who consumed and responded to the information press.

A Prosopography of the Writing Public

Among the signed letters, a prosopography of the writing public begins to emerge. Approximately 50.2 percent of the letters published between 1770 and 1788 were signed by their authors, the majority of whom also included their social position or profession. The data from all published signatures formed the basis for the prosopography of letter writers. Identifying the writers according to their self-descriptions inevitably means that social and professional categories at times overlapped or were impossible to pinpoint more precisely. For example, the only writers classified as nobles in this prosopography are those who explicitly identified themselves as such. The social positions of the letter writers who did not share one remain unknown, and their positions in society may have differed in meaningful ways. The number of letters signed by profession are displayed in Figure 2.2.
Members of the clergy were regular contributors to the information press. Men affiliated with the church known as abbés wrote 205 letters, more than any other group within the clergy. In the eighteenth century the title abbé was used to identify oneself as a tonsured clergyman whether or not one was
ordained to the priesthood. Their correspondence covered literary, scientific, and practical subject matter. The lower secular clergy, composed of parish priests (curés) from middling backgrounds, wrote 137 letters, most of which concerned the material and moral care of their local parish. The subject matter of their letters included descriptions of potato farming, setting up scholarships for poor boys to enter the priesthood, offering alms for the poor in the parish, and caring for the sick. Among the secular clergy, parish priests wrote more letters than any other group. The upper secular clergy consisted of bishops, archbishops, and canons, most of whom came from the nobility; they wrote 114 letters to the editor. The regular clergy, that is, members of religious orders, authored far fewer letters than the secular clergy with 49 letters.

By comparison, nobles wrote far fewer letters to the editor. The composition of the nobility had had changed significantly over the eighteenth century. While precise figures do not exist for the entire century, approximately ten thousand men and their families were ennobled in the eighteenth century through the purchase of venal offices. Attaining nobility remained a meaningful signal of social advancement, as evidenced by the continual rise over the century in the cost of venal offices for those seeking noble status. In the information press a small proportion of writers identified themselves as members of the nobility in their signatures. The majority of the nobles who signed their letters indicated that they were retired members of the army, and this group consisted for the most part of military officers and military surgeons. As Christy Pichichero has shown, reform-minded public letters by members of the armed forces dated back to at least the 1760s during the campaigns to reform capital and corporal punishments for desertion. Drawing on the language of humanity and sensibility, they tried to convince the crown and the public to listen. Other members of the military who did not divulge their particular position in society also wrote letters to the editor. Men employed in the military administration, engineers, the constabulary, and the navy wrote fewer than ten letters each. Members of the king’s royal household wrote twenty-one letters.

Only nine of the men who signed their letters described themselves as bourgeois, and their correspondence appeared in the affiches published in Paris, Toulouse, Troyes, and Grenoble. “Bourgeois” was a juridical category that brought with it certain privileges in prerevolutionary France. In prerevolutionary Paris, bourgeois privilege was hereditary. As a self-descriptor, “bourgeois” indicated that one was an inhabitant of a particular town, or that one was associated with small business. In short, “bourgeois” was an ambiguous signifier, and few letter writers spoke of themselves as such.

Educated men in the liberal professions and the government were active and vocal participants in the social and cultural life of their local
communities, a role that extended into the information press. Among those without noble or clerical positions, men from the liberal professions, especially doctors, lawyers, notaries, and others employed in the legal system and in the royal bureaucracy, wrote the most letters to the editor. Their letters often reflected their professional and social investment. Members and corresponding members from French academies wrote 124 letters; their social position as noblemen or commoners remains unknown. Their contributions met the public interest in the arts and sciences in a short, manageable way. The range of topics covered in the letters to the editor written by corresponding secretaries covered a similar spectrum as the essay-writing competitions held by regional academies.  

Doctors, surgeons, dentists, and apothecaries contributed 292 letters. Nearly every letter written by a doctor concerned medicine: a report on a new technique witnessed at a hospital, a statement advocating inoculation, or a recipe for an effective remedy. They shared information for public adoption, especially medical remedies for everyday ailments such as the common cold. In their letters concerning childbirth in particular, surgeons emphasized how important their know-how could be. Medicine would remain one of the hallmarks of the information press. For doctors and surgeons alike, letters to the editor afforded them a channel to improve public health by circulating useful information. At the same time, and much to the consternation of the doctors, the information press also made it possible for the occasional charlatan to market his cure-all, or for untested treatments to gain recognition. The efforts of doctors and surgeons to police the boundaries of medical knowledge in the press were emblematic of the ways that the affiches enabled the spread of new information and conversations, just as they exposed the contestation of knowledge production.

Lawyers contributed approximately 171 letters that covered topics from the law to current events to belles lettres. Lawyers are represented in Figure 2.2 under the category of law. The legal system category includes all those who identified that they worked in parlements, presidial, baillage, sénéchaussée, prévôté, or seigneurial courts, and those who worked in special jurisdictions. The 156 contributions from government officials came from various state offices, including intendants and subdelegates, but also municipal mayors, court clerks (greffiers), and bookkeepers employed by the state or by local governments. Mayors wrote in to provide information about local current events and projects to improve the town, and intendants suggested ways to enhance agricultural
practices or road conditions in the areas they administered. Tax collectors and censors also contributed occasional letters. Reform-minded provincial administrators used the affiches to facilitate their campaigns for public works, agricultural innovation, and commercial growth.  

Although such men figured prominently in the pages of the affiches, they were by no means the only contributors. In fact, letters to the editor were authored by an expansive group of educated men and women, including architects and engineers who contributed to the preoccupation with public works in the newspapers. Booksellers, writers, and printers wrote forty-eight letters to the affiches. Writers and publishers often wrote to the newspaper when their personal reputation was at stake. They used the venue of the newspaper to advertise new books, to air their grievances with another writer for stealing their work, or to disavow a publication they had not authored appearing under their name. Secretaries, archivists, and librarians also wrote to share their interests in history and law in the affiches. Students and teachers wrote 138 letters on subjects relevant to their own areas of learning. The letters written by performers and artists publicized the spectacles in which they would soon appear.

Newspapers also published correspondence from abroad, but the authors of such letters tended to be wealthy individuals or well-known published authors. Some wrote in the form of travel narratives, which were growing in popularity at the time. In general, they sought to contribute to a growing body of knowledge about the wider world. Doctors worked collectively, comparing notes in the hope of treating their patients more effectively. International travelers sought to understand France’s relationship to its empire and to the wider world. In general, such writers shared a comparative approach, and their careful notation of difference reflected the early anthropological literature available in popular novels, philosophical texts, and current news periodicals.  

What made the forum of letters to the editor unique among eighteenth-century venues for debate and discussion, though, were the contributions by men and women lower in the social strata in towns and in the countryside, including farmers, artisans, and merchants. In rare instances, those employed in domestic service and even someone calling himself a day laborer (manœuvre) contributed letters. In the case of the manœuvre, his correspondence referenced his own expertise with canal and bridge projects in the town. Historians of the *Journal de Paris* have emphasized that the Parisian daily was popular reading material for domestic workers. Their correspondence generally concerned their work. An innkeeper and a postmaster wrote letters to the editor. Luxury cloth merchant manufacturers, a milliner, and
a second-hand clothing dealer each wrote letters.\textsuperscript{21} The artisans who wrote to the Parisian press included locksmiths, a master bookbinder, and a master joiner.\textsuperscript{22} Letters from clockmakers and a tanner appeared in provincial papers.\textsuperscript{23} Some of the artisans who wrote letters were quite wealthy master craftsmen; for example, the queen’s stringed-instrument maker wrote two letters to the Journal de Paris.\textsuperscript{24} In short, men and women from the working and artisanal classes not only read newspapers but also participated in them by writing letters to publications in Paris and in provincial urban centers.

Writers from the countryside also included agricultural workers from an array of social statuses. Most farmers specified that they were of a higher economic status—such farmers were landowners, plow owners (laboureurs), or leasers of seigneurial land. Laboureur was the name for “middling landowners and tenants.”\textsuperscript{25} But laboureur could also connote rather different positions: a commercial status, which included landownership and grain production; a reference to a merchant’s family background from the peasantry; or a designation as a fermier who shared a business orientation toward grain production.\textsuperscript{26} One writer to the Affiches de Troyes signed his letter as a “receveur de terre,” a wealthy farmer who leased seigneurial land and buildings.\textsuperscript{27} Three letters by winegrowers appeared in the affiches in Poitiers and in Paris.\textsuperscript{28} The other farmers who indicated their profession described themselves as cultivateurs or agriculteurs.\textsuperscript{29} On one occasion, a cultivateur also indicated he was a landowner.\textsuperscript{30} For the most part, the correspondence from farmers focused on agriculture. As was the case for the writers who were merchants and artisans, their letters appeared in a mix of Parisian and provincial newspapers. As chapter 5 will show, agronomy and those who carried out agricultural work were salient topics of interest in the capital and in towns throughout the kingdom.

The juxtaposition of voices made the newspapers a unique locus of information exchange, if at times a cacophonous one. The general informational nature of the affiches afforded interested parties a venue to speak to different audiences. At times, writers’ interests pushed against one another. Writing a public letter to the newspaper also prompted writers to consider why a vast and varied public ought to listen to them. The published correspondence thus revealed both the engagement of newspapers with the ideas of their day and the rhetorical strategies that writers employed to reach a more expansive audience. To be sure, writers from agricultural, artisanal, and merchant backgrounds wrote a smaller proportion of the total correspondence that appeared in print. Nevertheless, their presence in the pages of the affiches was significant. Their voices were situated on the newspaper page along with the contributions of writers from more elite circumstances. Few other
eighteenth-century spaces made room for people from such a spectrum of social backgrounds to participate in the same conversations.

As a public venue that one accessed remotely, writing a letter to the newspaper enabled women to take part in public conversations from the privacy of their own homes. Letter writing was widely regarded as a respectable practice, and women from various social positions wrote to the papers. Among the corpus of 6,909 letters, women who identified their gender explicitly signed seventy letters. Precisely who many of these women were remains difficult to determine in the majority of cases, because they concealed their identity. In the Parisian press, and occasionally in provincial affiches, writers identified themselves only as “une Abonnée,” a subscriber. In at least ten cases, the writer indicated she was a countess, a marquise, or a baroness, but she omitted her name. Letters written by women who signed “Madame ***” were just as frequent. Four letters were written by young women, who referred to themselves as “une jeune demoiselle”. It is likely that many elite women wrote anonymously out of adherence to social norms of modesty and privacy, though there were other reasons to choose anonymity. Contemporaneous norms in Britain have shown that anonymity was widespread in the eighteenth century, owing to a range of motivations, including the genre in which one wrote. Moreover, just as Mary Louise Roberts has shown for Marguerite Durand and the women who wrote for her fin de siècle newspaper a century later, women who participated in journalism navigated a space for themselves by presenting a public image that was culturally acceptable. Such a “strategic repetition of old roles in new contexts” enabled women to maintain an image that was at once respectable and transgressive. So too the women who wrote to the affiches navigated a space for themselves that was public and innovative, even as they abided by certain gendered norms of respectability.

Some women identified themselves by name. Dressmakers such as Madame Guedon indicated their name and their profession, as did Galet the dentist and De Rousset the schoolmistress. Widows of well-known men also signed their names to letters in which they publicized their late spouse’s work and memory. The widow of the chemist and apothecary Guillaume-François Rouelle wrote to the Journal de Paris to correct errors in a false advertisement concerning her late husband and nephew. The widow Weisse also wrote, out of “duty to the public and to the memory of M. Weisse,” to rebuff criticism of his medicinal remedy for postpartum complications. She also submitted her husband’s remedy to the Société Royale de Médecine and received a pension. Some women used the self-descriptor of “widow” to publicize their own work. The widow of Nicolas-Bonaventure Duchesne
published her letter to the *Journal de Paris* and her books under the name “Widow Duchesne.” In a letter advertising her book of proverbs, the writer and moralist Madame de Laisse described herself as a widow.

In at least one case, a widow was assisted in the composition of her letters to the editor. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s partner, Thérèse Levasseur, sent two letters to the *Journal de Paris*, discussing the posthumous publication of Rousseau’s work. Her letters were republished in the *Affiches de Dijon*. Levasseur’s May 1779 letter was written by the publisher of Rousseau’s complete works, François d’Ivernois, according to a sketch provided by Rousseau’s friends, Paul-Claude Moulton and Pierre-Alexandre Du Peyrou. Rousseau’s last student, René-Louis de Girardin, marquis of Vauvray, then edited the letter before Levasseur signed it, and the letter was sent to the editors of the *Journal de Paris*. Levasseur’s private correspondence differed in orthography and clarity of expression from the published letters that appeared under her name in the press. The differences between her private correspondence and her published letters are significant. But even in the case of Levasseur, where scholars know more about the many hands that labored in her letters, the extent of editorial intervention in her letters remains unknown, precisely because of the collective efforts to write them.

Celebrities also wrote to the newspapers. The actress of the Comédie Française, Françoise Marie Antoinette Joseph Saucerotte, wrote to the Parisian papers in 1778 using her stage name, Mademoiselle Raucourt. A letter from Mademoiselle Beaumesnil, the composer and singer at the Paris Opéra, was published a month later. The actress Andrée Coche also wrote a letter as Madame Vanhove; her husband, Charles-Joseph Vanhove, was a comédien du roi. Although such letters were less common in the provincial press, Marguerite Brunet wrote to the *Affiches de Normandie* under her stage name, Madame Montansier. La Montansier was a powerful figure who maintained exclusive rights to balls and performances at Versailles, as well as the privileges for playhouses in Brittany, Normandy, Picardy, and Anjou.

Women discussed an array of subject matter in their correspondence. In the case of the *Journal de Paris*, women wrote on topics ranging from literature to philanthropy, and from music to scientific discoveries. Some touched on issues of marriage or divorce; others addressed the experiences of women as authors and advocated for the equality of women. One reader noted that the variety of the newspaper content was suitable for the women who read it at their toilettte, where the paper would “adorn her mind” while she prepared her head. Writing letters that were intended to be shared also became a critical avenue for the political formation of women such as Rosalie Jullien, who remarked on the newspapers she read in her family correspondence,
and who later wrote a public letter to the *Journal patriote de Romans* in 1790. Through writing a public letter, Jullien articulated her own public identity and, during the Revolution, her own political opinions.\(^{49}\)

The process of writing a letter to the newspaper gave women’s individual experiences new meaning and significance. While women wrote on themes such as the moral education of one’s children and charitable efforts for the poor, their correspondence in the affiches made clear that all subject matter concerned them. One pointedly critiqued the editor for printing content concerning Rétif de la Bretonne’s views on women.\(^{50}\) For many women, their letters to the editor were their first and only published works. The practice of writing allowed women from an array of backgrounds to, as Carla Hesse describes, “separate [themselves] from their ideas, to take possession of them, and to exchange them with others across space and time.”\(^{51}\) A letter to the editor was a means of making oneself visible, both to the writer who penned the letter and to others.

Over the eighteenth century, France had grown more wealthy, populous, and urban than ever before, and the people who wrote to the affiches in part reflected such social changes. Most letter writers in the information press were from educated but middling backgrounds. Men from the liberal professions, parish clergy, and correspondents with the academies were all prevalent interlocutors. Very few writers were merchants or manufacturers. Moreover, many contributors worked for the state, in the legal system, as administrators, or as tax collectors. Parish priests wrote letters regularly. Thus, rather than indicating a bourgeois domain driven by equity among consumers, the letters to the editor suggest the interests of individuals from differing social positions, corporate statuses, and professions. The wide array of social backgrounds of the writers influenced the scope of perspectives in their letters. As each writer made their case for the editor to print their letter, the affiches displayed the social jostling that was transpiring on the newspaper page and beyond it.

For the prerevolutionary press, some writers’ self-descriptions eluded straightforward classification according to a social rank or corporative status. The discursive space of the newspaper afforded writers the opportunity to assert their authority in new ways, even as Old Regime structures of power persisted. With their signatures, letter writers identified themselves in ways that reflected the shifts in social value placed on economic, social, and professional status in the late eighteenth century. Some who benefited from corporate statuses indicated their affiliation in the affiches. However, it is significant that many writers did not use the vocabulary of rank or profession to
describe who they were. Instead, they sought an equity in social recognition, what John Shovlin has called in other contexts a “parity of esteem.” For many who did not have a social position, the newspaper presented writers with room to make other claims about why readers ought to listen. Reputation and experience were repertoires from which writers from disparate social, commercial, and professional contexts could draw in the press.

Pseudonymous Writing

Some writers did not divulge their identity and social position and instead adopted strategies to conceal or suggest a public persona. The limitations on newspaper content specified in each paper’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 some contributors to reveal their identities. While approximately half of writers chose to identify themselves by name, 8.3 percent of letters published between 1770 and 1788 appeared under pseudonyms, both false names and self-descriptions of various kinds. The pseudonyms included classical allusions, literary references, archetypal figures, and professional descriptors. Pseudonyms offered writers a means of sharing potentially unpopular or controversial opinions without requiring the author to bear the social, professional, or legal consequences. For much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, pseudonyms had protected writers working under censorship. In the affiches, letters signed with a pen name remained a small but consistent trend.

Pseudonyms situated a writer’s authority to speak on a given subject. This was especially the case for names that emphasized the writer’s profession, for example, “an artist from the old Academy of Saint-Luc”; “the publisher of the Journal des Théâtres”; “a parish priest from the vicinity of Civrai”; “a country farmer (cultivateur)”; or simply “a doctor.” 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 of familiarity with the subject of the letter, as a priest would know the needs of his parish, and a farmer would understand the health of grain in his region. Such descriptors encouraged the reader to imagine the person who possessed an opinion on a given topic. Moreover, by including letters from men and women in various professions, the newspapers provided a collective portrait of the audience the editors intended to reach.

Some pseudonyms omitted any mention of profession and instead focused more directly on the writers’ relationship to the topic they discussed. Their names identified the writers as experts, like the contribution written
collectively by the group “the lettered persons from Senlis,” or amateurs, such as the writer who chose the English pen name “Tom Reader.” Pseudonyms served a rhetorical purpose by identifying writers as social elites or as 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 by “a hermit from the Sennar forest,” “a solitary patriot and farmer from Dauphiné,” “the spectator,” “the unknown hermit,” or “the English traveler” painted themselves as outsiders whose isolation granted them objectivity, or at least a fresh perspective. Alternatively, some signatures included place names, like “un Lexovien,” to convince the reader of the author’s identity as a resident and interested party from Lisieux, a town in Lower-Normandy. In the *Journal de Paris*, partisans who signed their letters as “Les Gluckistes” and “Les Piccinistes” debated opera. By their pen names, writers established their authority and proximity to the subject matter of their letter.

The use of a pen name could also function as a mask—both obscuring the true identity of the writer and allowing for the creation of a public persona. In the case of the *Journal de Paris*, pseudonymous writers became for the newspaper’s readers a vivid cast of characters, such as “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, and critiquing and defending them. Even if the reader knew the true identity of the writer behind the pen name, the pseudonymous identity took on a life of its own, much like a fictional character might. At this time in the early American republic, pseudonyms functioned in a similar manner. The American affinity for Latin pen names was tied to the author’s effort to relate a larger political situation to a classical figure or ideal, in order to make abstract concepts in political philosophy more legible to the reader. While those who wrote letters to the press in France were not as fond of Latin pen names—“Pro Patria” and “Symbulus” were rare exceptions in the French newspapers—pseudonyms in the affiches did valuable rhetorical work to explain the position of the writer.

Pseudonyms served not only as masks for their authors but also as rhetorical tools deployed by writers to support their arguments. One writer used both literal and figurative masks to distance himself from the claims in his letter. Taking on the identity of “Scaramouche” as his pseudonym and as his costume at a masked public ball in Toulouse, he related an encounter at the Carnival festival with an elegant woman. She described the experience of Lent in the present age as one of pleasure and amusement, which had diminished the fervor and piety that had characterized the season in ages past. She confided that she found “morality in the Heart of honest men,”
and she boasted, “I laugh as much as I can, because gaiety is the balm of life.” The entire letter used a series of masks—the mysterious woman, the masked man, and the pseudonymous author—to distance the writer from the unorthodox opinions on morality and religion that he espoused in the paper. 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. Pen names also served as shorthand for a set of social expectations that the writer could then uphold or subvert in the letter.

**Initialed and Unsigned Letters**

Anonymous letters to the editor made up approximately 30.4 percent of all the letters published in Paris and in the provinces between 1770 and 1788. Such letters were either unsigned or, in 4.7 percent of cases, signed simply as a subscriber, “un/e de vos abonnés/e.” The nearly 5 percent of writers who signed their letters as “one of your subscribers” situated themselves as stakeholders to whom the editors should listen. Their claims of subscribership placed demands on the editors to print their work or face the possibility of losing a customer.

In the early 1770s anonymous contributions to the provincial affiches were rare, but the number of anonymous letters increased sharply in 1777 when the *Journal de Paris* began publication. Approximately a hundred unsigned letters appeared each year throughout the late 1770s and 1780s. Indeed, eighteenth-century editors were much more willing than editors in the twenty-first century to accommodate writers who wished to remain anonymous. Today, most newspapers reject anonymous letters automatically. Among eighteenth-century newspapers that relied heavily on letters from subscribers to fill their pages, editors printed letters without signatures, although in many cases the editor knew the author. Anonymity was a ubiquitous approach to publishing in the eighteenth century because it served many purposes for the writer and the editor.

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. In one such study to verify that a series of anonymous letters published in the *Journal de Paris* were indeed the work of the economist and Encyclopedist André Morellet, Dorothy Medlin compared Morellet’s private correspondence with Benjamin Franklin, five manuscript letters housed in a Genevan archive and the municipal library in Lyon, and the anonymously published letters to the editor. While it is possible in rare cases like this one to find anonymous letters that can be matched to well-known writers, the lack of extant manuscript
letters and the sheer number of letters published anonymously makes a
large-scale investigation of this sort impossible. Nevertheless, the example
of Morellet’s anonymous letters underscores that both known intellectuals
and marginalized individuals adopted anonymity.

Most anonymous letters appeared in the paper simply without any signa-
ture. The lack of explanations for anonymity by the writers or by the editors
who published them indicates that neither party felt an obligation to explain
why writers did not sign their names. In a sample of ten years of publication
in the Affiches de Dijon, where anonymous letters appeared throughout the
decade, only three anonymous letters were printed with an editorial expla-
nation for the unsigned letters. In the vast majority of cases, no explanation
appeared at all. When authors did mention why they wished their letters to
remain private, the rationale was that the writers preferred not to risk their
reputations by attaching their names to a letter. In the text of the letters,
writers insinuated that the editor of the Affiches de Dijon knew their iden-
tity, but they asked for editorial discretion in omitting their name. One such
writer asked the editors for anonymity out of fear that his letter’s frankness
would upset his mother. Another concluded his letter by assuring the editor
that while he was sure that his medicinal remedy would work, he would
rather that the paper leave out his name and in effect shield his professional
reputation.\textsuperscript{62} Such requests emphasized the potential costs writers could
experience if their letters’ contents were not well received. By concealing
their identities, they sought to protect their public names. Letters concerned
with charitable and philanthropic action asked for anonymity instead out of
a sense of public virtue. In such cases, it was the very anonymity of such acts
of goodwill that made them charitable, as benefactors were not supposed to
be interested in receiving public recognition for their contributions.

When anonymous letters included a postscript from the editors, the edi-
tors provided information about the professional background or the public
stature of the anonymous contributor. In an editorial note, the editors of
the affiches published in Metz included the writer’s profession as a way
of distancing the newspaper from the content of the letter: “This letter is
signed by a well-known amateur in this town who has asked us to publish it
without naming him. We think we should give warning that, on this occa-
sion, in reporting the various letters addressed to us, we do not pretend to
adopt any system, nor to take any side.”\textsuperscript{63} The editor of the Affiches du Dauphiné
noted that one letter was written by a professor of law “known for his
lumières and for his patriotic love,” but she did not name him. In a particu-
larly specific editorial note in the Affiches du Dauphiné, Souverant specified
not only the author’s profession but also the courier who had delivered the
CHAPTER 2

letter to her: “This article is by a physicien from Grenoble. It was handed to the director of this paper by a magistrate of the city, who is very zealous for the progress of the sciences, to whom the author has paid homage.” Over time, her claims about the writers she published grew much more general in form, attesting only to their status within the community, as she did in the following two letters: “This article was addressed to us by a person of consideration of this city,” or “This article is from a very enlightened and highly regarded person.”

What these references tend to suggest is that even if the letters did appear anonymously in the paper, the contributor’s identity was usually known to the editors. They tended to be members of the community whose reputation and ideas the editor respected and, in some cases, felt compelled to publish.

Finally, 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 composed approximately 11.1 percent of all letters published from 1770 to 1788. Initialed letters obscured the writer’s identity to the newspaper’s readership as a whole, but they provided those in the same town, profession, or social circle with information to identify the writer. In this way, one could remain anonymous to the general reading public of the newspaper while at the same time revealing oneself to a smaller subgroup of fellow readers. This tactic lent writers a coded means of communicating to friends, colleagues, and correspondents in the know about their identities. As the example of Hardy at the opening of this chapter illustrates, an initialed letter could be claimed by the writer and shown to one’s friends once it was published. 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 publicize a current event, submitting one’s thoughts to the paper saved the time and resources of writing many letters to various friends and acquaintances.

Most letters signed with initials were accompanied by a description of the writer’s social position or profession. For example, perhaps in an effort to avoid outright conflict with health practitioners whom he vehemently denounced as charlatans in his letter, a doctor writing to the Affiches de l’Orléanois signed only with his initials. The editors of the affiches in Metz included a small note distancing themselves from an unknown author: “We do not permit ourselves any reflection about the letter that you are about to read; it suffices to observe we do not have the honor of being known to the artist who wrote it, and that we have never had the least relation with him, even an indirect one.” In cases such as 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. Moreover, individuals who did not sign their letters may have adopted this approach when their letters consisted of plagiarized or fictional content drawn directly from or in emulation of epistolary novels, operas, or letter-writing manuals. Initials allowed both the letter writer and the editorial staff to distance themselves from the content of a letter that could become controversial.

**Letter Writing and Authorship**

In order to assess whether writing a letter was indeed the first foray into print for the readers of the affiches, an author search of the Bibliothèque nationale de France’s online catalogue was conducted for all signed letters in a sample set of newspapers. The sample test included all of the 449 letters published in four newspapers from Poitiers, Metz, Dijon, and Paris in 1774, 1779, and 1785. Three years were selected in order to assess change over time. The letters signed by writers who were already published constituted nearly a third of all signed letters within the sample set. The prestige of such writers varied; some had published only one pamphlet related to their profession. For example, doctors occasionally published a pamphlet related to best practices in their field, such as how to prevent postpartum blood loss or how to treat rabies. Others were rather prolific authors: playwrights such as Honoré-Antoine Richaud-Martelly, Carlo Goldoni, and Joseph Marie Piccini; scientists such as astronomer Joseph Jérôme Lefrançois de Lalande, engineer Jean-Claude Pingeron, chemist (and later deputy to the Legislative Assembly) Louis-Bernard Guyton de Morveau, and physicien Joseph-Aignan Sigaud de la Fond; moralists such as l’Abbé Méry de la Canorgue; and a libertine writer, Simon-Pierre Mérard de Saint-Just, were among those who wrote pamphlets and books in addition to their letters “aux auteurs du journal.”

The investigation into a sample of four newspapers confirms that the majority of letter writers were previously unpublished when they wrote to the newspaper. Among the published authors, both prolific specialists and occasional pamphleteers wrote to the affiches to discuss a range of questions.

While published letters were a commonplace in the Old Regime press, little manuscript source material exists to corroborate the identity of the writers who identified themselves, and historians will probably never know with certainty who wrote the unsigned letters. Eighteenth-century publishing practice was for the editor to send original manuscript letters directly to the printing shop. Once the type was set and the pages printed, the printer
would typically recycle the paper on which the letters were written or sell it for scrap. As a result, manuscript letters to the editors are exceedingly rare. Indeed, the only newspapers with extant archival records are those that were seized by the police in cases of bankruptcy or political offense.

The manuscript records that do exist from subscribers to the editors have received thorough investigation. Such extant newspaper records were preserved because the papers were shut down for their conservative political leanings during the French Revolution, and their records were seized. The confiscation of prerevolutionary publication records is even more rare, with the exception of the women’s newspaper that published without a royal privilège until it was shut down in 1778, the *Journal des dames*. For moderate newspapers such as the affiches that for the most part avoided shutdown, little manuscript records remain about the editors or their contributors. With the exception of François Moysant in Caen and Jean Florent Baour in Toulouse, the editors to the affiches left few manuscript records concerning their work; even in their cases, the extant records do not encompass their decisions about what they chose to publish in their newspapers.

The individual letters received by the editors, and the editors’ decision-making processes of what to print, what to reject, and what to modify, remain obscured. My own extensive investigation of the personal papers and scant records of the editors of affiches published in Toulouse, Troyes, Poitiers, Dijon, and Caen, held in provincial libraries and archives, unearthed only a few manuscript letters in the municipal libraries in Poitiers and Troyes that were written to the editors of prerevolutionary affiches. Such editorial practices in France are consistent with contemporaneous practices in Britain. A comparison of extant manuscript letters written to the editors of the English *Tatler* and *Spectator*, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, with the newspapers themselves indicated that the letters preserved were precisely those the editors never published. Furthermore, as was the case for letters to the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, even when it is possible to locate manuscript letters, the historian learns very little about why particular letters were or were not published. The editors never left any explanation.

Since no external evidence of editorial practices remains in the extant manuscript letters, nor in editors’ diaries or personal correspondence, the historian must develop other means for reading these valuable sources. The approach in this book is a detailed analysis of the internal evidence of the letters themselves and an attention to the questions that the writers’ self-fashioning allow the historian to consider. In the French case, the very array of topics covered in the letters, the stylistic variation in prose, and the number of letters published by known authors all suggest that the editors sought to represent a wide
cross-section of the French reading public. Although it is also possible that some of the letters might have been written by the editors themselves or by paid correspondents, the differences in orthography, rhetorical approaches, and content strongly suggest that this was not often the case. Indeed, published correspondence in Anglophone North America followed a similar trend: the vast majority of letters were written by readers, but some were produced by the editors or were composites of several letters on a given topic compiled into a single piece. The writing styles of the letters published in the French information press likewise varied, indicating a multiplicity of contributors.

The men and women who voiced their opinions in the affiches came from disparate backgrounds and adopted varied strategies for presenting their identities. More than half of all contributors gave some indication of their name or profession. Although previously published authors penned letters, writers who were otherwise unable to get their ideas into print also participated in the forum of letters to the editor. As one writer to the Journal de Paris explained in his letter to the editor, “I have neither the courage nor the talent to make a book, but it is pleasant and easy for me to put on paper the ideas and observations that my travels and studies have put me within reach to collect.” For amateur writers with ideas to share, the information press afforded a path to publication. The range of social positions and professional interests—which included not only men of letters but also women, farmers, and craftsmen—set apart the forum of letters to the editor as an especially open sphere of eighteenth-century sociability.

Writing a letter to the editor was the bridge by which a wide array of literate men and women entered into public debate. They articulated who they were with a public audience in mind. But writing a letter was also personal, as writers asserted who they were. In writing letters to the editor, the authors defined themselves as private individuals, and in doing so they articulated their relationship to and space within the public. Self-fashioning was mediated through the act of writing. For the writers, the simultaneously public and private act of writing a letter to the newspaper provided a space for known authors and marginal figures alike to try out public personae. In writing to a wide audience, most of whom were unknown to the author, letter writers had to convince the editors that their comments were worth sharing. In making the case that the editor ought to print the letter, writers made claims about what the information press was for and what their fellow subscribers ought to read. Their answers were capacious and contestatory ones.