Chapter 3

Reading Together, Book References, and Interacting with Print

In 1779 a merchant named Chevalier wrote to the *Journal de Paris* about how much he loved to read. “I am not a man of letters,” he confided; “the details of a fairly large trade occupy the best part of my time; but I like literature, and above all poetry, so every moment that I can spare without prejudice to my profession as a merchant, I willingly share between the reading of our poets and the conversation of my friends.” Like most of the consumers of the information press, Chevalier was not a writer who traveled in literary circles. He found his livelihood in another profession, but he nevertheless wanted to participate in the cultural life of the city. Rather than writing to a literary magazine, he and many subscribers shared their affinity for reading in the information press. They introduced the works they had read, and they began a conversation in the newspaper about them.

This chapter examines the ways that writers signaled to their fellow readers what they were reading and, on occasion, how they explained the experience of reading itself. To study the texts that the French newspaper-reading public accessed and how they read them, this chapter begins by discussing the books and other print matter that letter writers referenced in their correspondence. The case study consists of the citation strategies in all of the letters published in 1778, 1782, and 1788 in newspapers from Aix-en-Provence, Amiens, Angers, Arras, Caen, Compiègne, Dijon, Grenoble, Lyon, Marseille, Metz, Montpellier, Orléans, Paris, Poitiers, Reims, Rennes, Rouen, Toulouse,
and Troyes. Not all letters mentioned a book. Among the 1,567 letters published in the three-year sample, 24.1 percent of the letters to the editor referenced book titles. By comparison, 24.7 percent cited another letter to the editor or an article that they had read, either in the same newspaper or in another periodical. The remaining letters referenced no print works at all. Over the three years sampled, readers identified 441 unique titles in their letters. In addition, they referenced 204 authors in general, that is, without reference to a specific title. (For a complete list of the titles cited, see appendix B.) Writers cited books and authors to support their own arguments or work through their own ideas.

This chapter also investigates the writers’ experiences of reading. The analysis is drawn from the corpus of 6,909 letters published between 1770 and 1788. In their critiques and close readings, the writers to the press expressed their emotional and analytical processes of participating in a world of print. Together, the body of letters offers a window into the reading practices of a large and diverse community. By situating their responses in the information press, they invited the newspaper’s consumers to read alongside them.

**Writing to the Affiches**

The style of referencing previous content from the newspaper reinforced the editors’ claims that the affiches were in dialogue with their readers. Writers indicated in general, and in some cases with reference to a particular issue number or date of the paper, that their correspondence was a response to a previous article or letter. In some cases where writers cited a particular letter to the editor, debates ensued between two or more interlocutors over the ensuing weeks. The debates in the press also underscored the limits of what was known and accepted by all. Writers responded to share new evidence on an issue of debate or to offer a different interpretation of the evidence already in the paper.

References to previous newspaper content were also a means of correcting the record, as editors did not typically print retractions. Instead, they published letters from readers that referenced another article or letter in the paper, and then they offered factual revisions, such as updating the proper address for a business or place of residence. More complex amendments included cases where the letter writer claimed or denied authorship of a published work that had appeared in the press under another name. Even quite well-known authors faced challenges of distinguishing authoritative and counterfeit work. As discussed in chapter 2, Thérèse Levasseur wrote a letter to the editor to specify the only authentic copies of a volume of
Rousseau’s Ouvrages. Counterfeit books proliferated as soon as the first run of a book was successful, and printers tended to order fewer copies of a given book for each edition they produced. As such, the possibility for error, even in authorized titles, was rather high. By sending updates and corrections on other print matter to the affiches, writers situated the newspapers as public record keepers. The serialized fashion of the calls for revision encouraged newspaper consumers to stay up to date in their reading.

By using their letters to reference other periodicals, writers opened up the information press to political and philosophical conversations. Approximately 1 percent of the letters to the editor published between 1770 and 1788 were responses not to previous content the writer had seen in the affiches but rather to literary periodicals such as the Mercure de France and L’Année littéraire and specialized journals on the law, the military, and medicine. All such periodicals were published with the requisite licenses and according to the Old Regime censorship strictures. Notably, letter writers also wrote to the affiches in response to newspapers published abroad, citing the Journal encyclopédique ou universel published in Liège and the Annales politiques, civiles et littéraires, which was published in London and, from 1780 to 1784, in Brussels.

They cited the London-based Courier de l’Europe, a French-language gazette for circulation in Great Britain that openly took positions on political questions. A second edition was published for the continent; in France the Courier was personally censored by the minister of foreign affairs, Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes. The Journal encyclopédique, the Courier de l’Europe, and the Annales politiques were periodicals that had the support of French polymaths and men of letters, including Jean-Louis Castilhon, Jean-Baptiste-René Robinet, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, Jean le Rond d’Alembert, and Voltaire. While they made up a small proportion of the total correspondence, letters to the editor that engaged with such publications cited content beyond the limits of censorship. The references to these publications reveal that the affiches’ readers accessed a range of periodicals, censored and uncensored. Information was shared between periodicals such that the affiches were not isolated from the political and philosophical ideas that circulated in the late eighteenth century. Selective citation was one strategy that made it possible for subversive content to appear, even in censored general information newspapers.

**Book Title References in the Information Press**

Nearly one in four letters included a reference to a book title or author. To investigate the range of book titles cited in the affiches, this section draws on
a three-year sample of letters to the editor where letter writers referenced 441 unique titles. The books cited in the affiches are organized in figure 3.1 according to the schema used in the eighteenth-century Parisian bookseller’s catalogs, which divided all books into five major categories: literary works (belles lettres), arts and sciences, history, jurisprudence, and theology.

As figure 3.1 shows, works of literature were cited in the information press most of all, composing 37.0 percent (163 titles) of the titles cited. Books and pamphlets on the sciences and arts constituted 29.5 percent of the works cited (130 titles), and history was the next most referenced category, with 22.4 percent of all book titles referenced (99 titles). The number of titles on jurisprudence (2.3 percent, with 10 titles) and theology (3.6 percent, with 16 titles) constituted a much smaller proportion of the books referenced in the information press. Approximately 5.2 percent of the titles referenced

![Figure 3.1](image)

**Figure 3.1** The number of unique book titles cited in the affiches, sorted by catalog subject matter schema.
by letter writers fall into the “undetermined” category. Works classified as “undetermined” included two kinds of books: titles that included too little information to identify them with certainty as a particular publication, and works that were not listed in the general catalog of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The titles referenced in the affiches encompassed an assortment of well-known and obscure books. In the eighteenth century, books were categorized according to catalogs kept by Parisian booksellers. This system emerged in the seventeenth century as an attempt to order all print knowledge in one system; the schema was shared by the Parisian booksellers and then adopted by booksellers and cataloguers. From such book catalogs, historians have traced the scale of book production and exchange in France. In addition to accounting for the books that were produced, bought, and sold, the catalogs divided books according to their subject matter. Each subject contained a series of subcategories with smaller subcategories of their own. For example, the category of sciences and arts included pyrotechnic art, the arts, natural history, mathematics, medicine and surgery, metaphysics, philosophy, and physics. The arts, for example, contained an additional outline of subcategories: architecture, art of painting, gymnastic and other athletic arts, military art, mechanical arts (*métiers*), dictionaries of the arts, and games. The catalogs reflected the efforts of booksellers and producers to conceptualize and order an increasingly vast print environment. Over the eighteenth century, the catalogs show the evolution in reading tastes toward an ever-wider range of print matter. Figure 3.2 presents a more detailed visualization of the books cited in the press according to the more descriptive subcategories within the catalog.

More than any other category, letter writers cited literature. Among the 163 titles within the larger category of belles lettres, polygraphs, dictionaries, novels, and poetry were the most referenced works. Compilations of selected writings known as polygraphs accounted for thirty-two of the titles, which included volumes of the works of writers who had recently died, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles-Pierre Colardeau, Germain-François Poulain de Saint-Foix, and Voltaire. Letter writers mentioned eighteen dictionaries or grammar books, including Pierre de la Ramée’s *Grammaire latine* and *Grammaire française*. Other reference books included dictionaries dedicated to music, Italian poetry, ariettas, diplomacy, the French language, and synonyms. Writers referenced twenty-two novels in their letters, including Voltaire’s *Candide* and Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes*. Treatises on education that adopted the form of a novel, such as Caroline-Stéphanie-Félicité du Crest, Madame de Genlis’s *Adèle et Théodore* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Émile*, ou
de l’éducation, also appeared in letters to the affiches. Epistolary novels referenced in the information press included Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady, Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint Pierre’s Paul et Virginie, and the Orpheline angloise, ou Histoire de Charlotte Summers. Even a relatively unknown picaresque work, Jean-François Douga- dos’s Voyage, was written in the style of an epistolary novel. Eighty-seven

Figure 3.2 The number of unique book titles cited in the affiches, sorted by catalog subcategory.
of the titles cited were works of poetry, including thirty-one plays or operas written in verse.

After literature, the sciences and arts garnered the most attention. The titles under sciences and arts encompassed practical guides on agricultural or geological subjects; observations on animal behavior and disease; explanations of chemistry experiments; medical and surgical treatments; philosophical works; and books on the arts of painting, hunting, and swimming. Among the 130 titles within the category of *sciences et arts* that appeared in the information press, twenty-five of the titles were works on the arts. Among them, five works each concerned architecture and the art of painting. One book covered the mechanical arts. Two titles—Jacques-Antoine-Hippolyte, comte de Guibert’s *Essai général de tactique* and General Gordon’s memoirs—were cited on military arts. Three books entailed the physical arts of hunting and swimming. Nine were encyclopedias, including Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*. The other dictionaries were dedicated to new inventions, or dictionaries of “Grands Hommes” or “hommes illustres.” Posthumous tributes to esteemed figures were prevalent both in the books that writers cited and in the affiches themselves as “nécrologie,” where the editors printed letters dedicated to renowned men in the style of an obituary.

The books that fell under the category of the sciences covered philosophical and practical studies on all aspects of the natural world. Sciences and arts encompassed mathematics (10 titles), medicine and surgery (26), metaphysics (3), natural history (23), philosophy (30), and physics (10). The books on mathematics encompassed studies of astronomy, geometry, and optics, including two works by Jean-Paul Marat, the future revolutionary. Books in the category of medicine and surgery included pharmacological texts, studies of health and illness, and fifteen titles on chemistry, such as essays by Joseph Priestley, John Pringle, and Pierre-Joseph Macquer. The three works on metaphysics concerned the occult; one of the titles in question was a treatise on werewolves by Paul Grillandus, a sixteenth-century exorcist. Natural philosophy books included practical works on botany and agriculture and observational studies of animals by Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, the Abbé Alexandre Henri Tessier, and Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. The category of philosophy also encompassed pieces on commerce and state finance by Adam Smith and Victor de Riquetti, marquis de Mirabeau, the economy of the home, and works of morality by Jacques Necker. Finally, philosophy also included political treatises and philosophical essays from antiquity, such as the work of Aristotle, and from celebrated eighteenth-century men of letters such as Rousseau and Voltaire. Among the ten works in the category of *physique* were Jean-Antoine Nollet’s work...
on electrical experimentation and instruments, *Leçons de physique expérimen-tale*, and Francesco Lana de Terzi’s seventeenth-century aeronautical study, *Magisterium naturae et artis*. The books on the sciences discussed in the information press suggest that readers were aware of and interested in recent breakthroughs in fields such as chemistry, and in new ways of thinking about natural philosophy, economics, and political philosophy.

Writers referenced ninety-nine works of history in the information press. The publications on historical subjects reflected the interest of readers in France in particular. Seven books were local in scope, including histories of the city of La Rochelle and the provinces of Dauphiné and Anjou. Twelve titles concerned the French monarchy. History subject matter also encompassed travel narratives, geographies, and atlases, which together accounted for twenty-two of the books referenced. Some periodical literature also fell within the category of history; fourteen almanacs and literary magazines were referenced in the information press. Letter writers also commented on histories of Italy, Germany, Russia, Turkey, China, and the Americas. The history books that appeared in the letters to the editor indicated the global and local, ancient and contemporary interests that writers brought to the information press. In citing histories, letter writers signaled to one another a curiosity about the world, an orientation that was shared by Parisian and provincial readers alike.

Histories of Ancient Greece and Rome also appeared in the affiches. Most of the books on antiquity cited in the newspapers were written in the eighteenth century, including works by Gian Rinaldo, comte de Carlireubbì, Gabriel Brotier, and Cornelius de Pauw. But letter writers also referenced titles from the classical past. One writer cited Plutarch’s *Lives*, a first-century work that had circulated in French translation since 1559. Another letter writer cited Titus Livius’s *History of Rome*, which had been available in French translation since the fifteenth century. Other books covered Greek music and philosophy, or the history of Rome’s public figures. Letter writers discussed antiquity avidly, even when they did not reference a particular book title. They commented on the Roman ruins in their vicinity, local history, and the Roman objects they collected. The eighteenth-century interest in antiquity was in part fostered by the Grand Tour. Yet even at the local level, collecting antiquities and corresponding about them was a popular hobby. The newspapers formed another layer in the social networks through which objects and information from antiquity were shared.

Works of theology constituted sixteen of the 441 titles referenced in the affiches. Two of the books were dedicated to the lives of saints: Godfrey Henschen’s *Acta Sanctorum*, a seventeenth-century encyclopedic hagiography of the saints, and a book on Jeanne-Françoise Frémiot, baronne de Chantal, a French saint canonized in 1767. Writers who referenced theological books mentioned
the sixteenth-century Jesuit Émond Auger most of all, including his sermons, catechism, and treatises on the duties of a Christian prince. Auger’s *Metanœologie* was referenced in seven letters to the editor; only Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* appeared in the press more. Most theology titles were devotional works, catechist texts, or collections of sermons, all of which were read by the laity in the eighteenth century. While the Bible did not appear in any references, an annotated edition of the Books of Lamentations and Psalms was cited in one letter. Notably, there were also religious works from outside Catholicism referenced in the affiches. One letter writer discussed the Koran. Another discussed Pierre François le Courayer, whose reform-minded beliefs included support of Jansenism and the Anglican Church. Taken together, the titles on theology suggest that religion was not a topic of regular discussion in the information press, even while the Bible and other devotional works remained best sellers. For those that did reference theological works in the affiches, books that supported religious practices were the most popular.

Books concerning jurisprudence spoke to a more specialized audience who consumed the provincial affiches. The works in this category included the *Gazette des tribunaux*, a compendium dedicated to legal proceedings and published essays written by lawyers on recent edicts. Two seventeenth-century books on French inheritance law, Jean-Marie Ricard’s *Traité des donations entre-vifs et testamentaires* and Denis Le Brun’s *Traité des successions*, were also referenced. While most of the titles concerned French law, works on the English legal system and on natural law also appeared in letters to the editor. The most prominent theme across such titles was criminal justice reform. William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* appeared in translation and was referenced in two letters. André-Jean-Baptiste Boucher-d’Argis was referenced in one letter for his *Observations sur les loix criminelles*. Nicolas de La Mare’s administrative works on policing, the *Traité de la police*, which were published in a series of volumes between 1707 and 1738, appeared in one letter. Composing only ten of the 441 book titles referenced, the works on jurisprudence do not fully reflect the dynamic level of engagement with criminal justice reform that was taking place in these decades. The limits of censorship and licensing of content likely restricted such discussions in the information press in ways that are evident today only by their absence.

**Frequently Cited Titles**

The vast majority of the titles cited in the information press appeared only once, with approximately 81.0 percent of the books (357 titles) referenced in one letter to the editor. Fifty-four works (12.2 percent) were mentioned twice.
Within the sample set of letters written in 1778, 1782, and 1788, writers cited thirty book titles three or more times. Repeated references to the same books suggest that those titles garnered greater discussion in the information press than did most books. Among such titles, works of literary fiction were particularly popular; they accounted for two-thirds of the works cited at least three times. James Macpherson’s epic poem *Ossian*, which appeared in French translation in 1777, was mentioned in three letters. A new French translation of Homer’s *Iliad* garnered attention in 1782, when four writers referenced it in their letters. The most often cited poem was Voltaire’s 1723 epic in homage to Henry IV, *La Henriade*, which five writers mentioned in their letters. *Clarissa*, the epistolary novel by Samuel Richardson, was cited in three letters, as was Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes*. Caroline-Stéphanie-Félicité du Crest, Madame de Genlis’s *Adèle et Théodore* appeared four times. Theatrical works such as Molière’s *Tartuffe*, as well as lesser-known plays such as Léonor-Jean-Christin Soulas d’Allainval’s *L’Embarass des richesses* and Louis Abel Beffroy de Reigny’s *Ailes de l’amour*, were each referenced in three letters. As the total number of references to each work suggests, the most popular books in the press were either written in the eighteenth century or recent translations. The ten most cited works are displayed below in table 3.1. Half of the titles were literary works, four were on the sciences and arts, and one was a theological text.

Writing a letter to the newspaper was a way of participating in a collective endeavor not unlike an encyclopedia. The most popular book referenced in the information press was the most widely known reference work of its time, Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, which was referenced in eight letters to the editor. Similar works, such as the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie*, d’Origny’s *Dictionnaire des origines*, and Macquer’s *Dictionnaire de chymie* were also among the top ten most cited books. Such compendia brought together many contributors on one shared project. The juxtaposition of information in these volumes was echoed in the organization of the newspaper page itself, which was also a multi-authored work where short articles on diverse topics were juxtaposed with one another.

However, for the most part book references in the information press did not cluster around a small corpus. Most books were mentioned only once in the newspapers. Rather than returning to a shared set of titles, letter writers instead signaled outward to an array of books and interests. Because the writers cited so many unique titles instead of repeatedly citing the same ones, letters to the editor reveal little about the best sellers of the eighteenth century. Instead, the references show the ways that writers used books to consider their own subjectivity and construct their own arguments.
In certain cases, citing a book served commercial purposes. Some references were likely surreptitious attempts to promote books one had written, or those one was selling. The references to Louis Abel Beffroy de Reigny’s work in the affiches were just that. While some letters were no doubt thinly veiled advertisements, the majority of letters mentioning specific titles gave no indication that they were trying to sell the book they discussed. Even in cases where the newspaper’s editor was a bookseller-printer, the works discussed in the paper were rarely available in his shop. A comparison of the books referenced in the affiches in Dijon, Orléans, and Poitiers with the lists of books the printer-booksellers had ordered from the Swiss publishing house the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel revealed only two titles: a volume of the collected works of Voltaire and a guide to vineyard cultivation by the agronomist Maupin. Thus, while it is possible that some writers did write letters to enhance their literary reputation, or printers published certain letters to drum up sales of their books, such cases were rare. There is not enough evidence in most cases to know with certainty what the motivations of the writers were. As a result, this study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BOOK TITLE</th>
<th>BOOK AUTHOR</th>
<th>NUMBER OF REFERENCES</th>
<th>CATALOG CATEGORY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L’Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers</td>
<td>Diderot, Denis, and Jean le Rond d’Alembert</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Sciences and arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dictionnaire de l’Académie</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metanœologie: sur le suget de l’archicongrégation des pénitens de l’annonciation de Nostre Dame et de toutes telles autres dévotieuses assemblées, en l’Église sainte</td>
<td>Auger, Émond</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunes</td>
<td>Beffroy de Reigny, Louis Abel</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courrier des planètes</td>
<td>Beffroy de Reigny, Louis Abel</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Étrennes de cousin</td>
<td>Beffroy de Reigny, Louis Abel</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Henriade</td>
<td>Voltaire</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dictionnaire des origines</td>
<td>Origny, Pierre-Adam d’</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sciences and arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dictionnaire de chymie</td>
<td>Macquer, Pierre Joseph</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sciences and arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Études de la nature</td>
<td>Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Henri</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sciences and arts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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does not distinguish between the titles in the rare letters that may have been advertisements and the rest of the corpus.

In publishing general information newspapers, the editors likely privileged certain kinds of works over others. For example, the low proportion of theological books referenced in the letters to the editor does not indicate that the readers of the affiches did not own or read the Bible, devotionals, or other theological works, which remained best sellers throughout the eighteenth century. Rather, the absence of such references may indicate that the discussion of theological topics was either redacted by the censors overseeing the press or self-censored by editors who chose not to print on such subject matter. The absence of citations could also allow for writers to slip more controversial discussions past the eyes of the censors. As studies of the citation practices in the Encyclopédie have shown, the most often cited books were works that both identified the author openly and had the official permissions and protections to publish. Nonattribution, and even misattribution, were effective strategies that writers used to evade the censors and place more subversive content in print. The absence of certain works in the affiches reflected the strategic choices of editors and letter writers.

**Frequently Cited Authors**

Some writers referenced an author without indicating a particular book or pamphlet at all. Table 3.2 presents a list of the twenty authors who were most referenced in the affiches, ranked by the number of total references. Voltaire and Rousseau were by far the most often referenced authors; both died in 1778, and several of the references to them were eulogies published that year. Racine and Corneille ranked just below Rousseau and Voltaire. And many of the references to Racine, Corneille, and Voltaire cited all three authors together. Voltaire may, in part, have inspired such a connection by his own commentary on Corneille and Racine.

As the references to authors illustrate, the affiches were not entirely separated from the world of the philosophes. The letter writers directly referenced some of the leading political philosophers, historians, and natural philosophers of the eighteenth century. Among the twenty most cited authors were five Encyclopedists: d’Alembert, Jean-François Marmontel, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Voltaire. Yet the authors who were mentioned in multiple letters were not all contemporary figures; letters referenced poets, playwrights, philosophers, and theologians from the Grand Siècle with as much frequency as those of the eighteenth century. The most cited authors
Table 3.2  The twenty most referenced authors, without citation of a particular title.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHOR</th>
<th>NUMBER OF REFERENCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voltaire</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean-Jacques Rousseau</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean Racine</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pierre Corneille</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molière</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean le Rond d’Alembert</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean de La Fontaine</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montesquieu</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virgil</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cicero</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacques-Bénigne Lignel Bossuet</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesop</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>François Fénelon</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horace</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean-François Marmontel</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pliny the Elder</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis Bacon</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean-André Deluc</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

also included five poets, philosophers, or historians from Greek and Roman antiquity. Antiquity was a subject of fascination in the eighteenth century, as a tool of legitimization of the present and a way to participate in the celebration of the past, but above all as a creative field that afforded writers more expansive opportunities to revise and reimagine familiar stories than did theological texts. The references to authors suggest that the readers of the affiches shared interests in philosophy, literature, and natural philosophy, and they drew on a cadre of classical, seventeenth-century, and contemporary authors to explore their interests. The writers to the affiches participated in an Enlightenment culture that was informed by such authors whose ideas permeated the lives and worldviews of late eighteenth-century figures from various social backgrounds.

The citations made by readers to periodicals, books, and authors revealed part of the information context in which the newspapers were consumed. Writers used references to books and periodicals as signposts to point the affiches’ readers toward a wider world of print. The books and authors mentioned in the press did not constitute a complete inventory of the books that
newspaper readers accessed in late Old Regime France. Thus, the absence in the affiches of particular titles that historians have identified as eighteenth-century best sellers does not indicate that such books were not consumed by the readers of the information press. Referencing a particular book title or author was a way of substantiating one’s argument in the short format of a public letter; book references caught the attention of the reader and linked the opinions of the letter writer to the works they mentioned. Citation was a means by which letter writers made sense of print and formulated their own ideas.

Interacting with Print

In addition to revealing books they read alongside the affiches, letter writers spoke self-reflexively about the experience of reading itself. Situated at the crux of the personal and the public, letters to the editor prompted readers to articulate their own subjectivities and the communities to which they wrote. While the principle purpose of a letter to the editor was to make an argument or present one’s case on a particular subject, writers also explained their experiences of reading in a range of interpretive and emotional forms. By studying the published correspondence that men and women shared about their reading habits, this chapter underscores what Leah Price has described as the “impossibility of separating individual reading practices from literary communities.”25 The placement of individual reactions in the information press linked personal and collective reading experiences.

In their letters, subscribers described when and how they read the newspaper. In Marseille “La Comtesse de ***” sketched her daily habit of reading the Journal de Provence at the start of each morning. She spent the rest of the morning perusing the Journal de Paris, then the Mercure, before dining with the Gazette de Santé right in front of her, and falling asleep with the English papers.26 A laboureur named Emme Gourdaut described his practice of keeping copies of the Affiches de Troyes at home and reading each issue seven or eight different times.27 For some, reading the newspaper was a shared process. A writer who described himself as the “Suisse du Cirque” explained a copy of the newspaper only came to him once everyone with whom he worked had read it.28 On one occasion, a writer to the Journal de Paris admitted that he did not read the Journal regularly because he did not know how to read properly; the paper was read to him.29 As these cases illustrate, writers approached the newspaper page with distinctive habits, skills, and aims.
Letters to the editor also offered glimpses into the physical circumstances under which people read, as even letters that were not primarily concerned with books or periodicals nevertheless touched on the material contexts of reading. For example, a young woman wrote to the *Affiches d’Angers* to report on her recovery from cataract surgery; she named being able to read again, with the aid of glasses, as a sign of her progress. A writer to the *Journal de Paris* concerned primarily with ventilation in the home identified being able to read in one’s bed without fear of smoke or fire among the merits of properly constructed chimneys. For some, reading the newspaper was a way of spanning the distances that separated subscribers. An anonymous writer explained to the editors of the *Journal de Paris* that while he was some sixty leagues from Paris, he continued to read the paper for both education and amusement.

In short, the contributors to the affiches read the paper in varying ways—extensively each day with other newspapers or intensively at home; borrowed from one’s coworkers or alone and far from the site of publication. They read the paper for information and entertainment. And they wrote back to the paper to continue the conversation. For the readers of the information press, reading had become a necessary and ubiquitous pastime; writing back to the paper was, as one writer put it, a means of recognizing the newspaper’s usefulness and supporting its success.

References to newspapers and books also featured readers’ responses to particular content by justifying their own letters in response to the feelings or questions that previous newspaper content inspired. A letter signed by “three of your subscribers” exclaimed that they “had been unable to read without emotion” a description of filial piety that appeared in the previous day’s paper. In response to an article published in the same paper, one writer noted that he read the piece in the *Journal de Paris* “with as much interest as sensibility.” Trassart, the vicar-general at Saint-Papoul, described how he read “with tenderness” a touching letter that appeared in the paper. While descriptions of emotional responses were the most prevalent, letter writers also demonstrated their willingness to share differing perspectives. The flurry of correspondence over Émond Auger’s theological treatises and sermons illustrated this phenomenon, when writers shared their own interpretations of Auger’s work via the press. By referencing one another as well as books, those who wrote letters to the editor practiced reading collectively.

In the published correspondence in the information press, three trends emerged. First, the writers responded to books in emotional terms. Those who documented the experience of reading often emphasized the depth of feeling that gripped them, especially when they spoke of reading novels. Second, writers took seriously their role of critiquing the books and periodicals
they had read, and they wrote to the affiches to offer corrections and suggest revisions. Readers of encyclopedias and other multiauthored works were especially active participants. Finally, they asked the editors to print excerpts of what they were reading so that they could comment on the text in greater depth. Such close readings were especially common in discussions of poetry. Together, the letters conveyed the multifaceted ways in which people of varying backgrounds interacted with print.

Reading with Emotion

The capacity of literature to draw out an emotional response in the reader was most evident in the letters to the editor that concerned popular sentimental novels. Epistolary novels in particular burgeoned in the period between the 1760s and the 1780s, with thirty new novels appearing each year in France in the 1770s and forty new novels published annually in the 1780s.  

A letter by the future revolutionary Antoine-François Delandine that was published in the affiches in Grenoble and in Paris aptly demonstrated the personal impact of this trend. He responded to his recent experience of reading Bernardin de Saint Pierre’s epistolary novel Paul et Virginie, which chronicled the moral and social education of two children raised in an idealized state of nature on colonial Mauritius (Isle de France). Moved by the descriptions of an island paradise and the sentimental renderings of the characters, Delandine wrote a glowing review to the newspaper: “I found the heart I had at eighteen and it took me until the sublime and consoling passage that ends the work to compose myself. Maybe there were some digressions that were a bit too long, nevertheless one wouldn’t want to remove a sentence, not a single word.” He saw the novel not only as a source of entertainment but rather as an emotional and moral journey: “With Paul and Virginie, I found myself satisfied with my existence.” Reading the novel was not only an aesthetic experience for Delandine, but one that gave him satisfaction in his own life and made him want to be useful in the lives of others. As he put it: “For a long time, I had not read something where the imagination was more varied, more brilliant, or where the moral at the end was better fulfilled. It is impossible to read it without desiring to be useful and without feeling better. There you have it—an occasion worthy of being seized upon by an enlightened Company, a protector of true talents and of their proper use.” Delandine suggested that Paul et Virginie should receive an annual prize for “écrits utiles.” As his letter illustrated, reading was a way of relating to the experiences of fictional figures. But the language of feeling also motivated his care for society, which he intended to demonstrate by finding ways to be useful.
Delandine’s reading of *Paul et Virginie* was emblematic of a style of sentimental reading that was especially pronounced in response to novels. Rousseau’s *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* inspired similar responses. In their letters to Rousseau, readers described being consumed by the novel in ways they experienced both emotionally and physically. They related to the characters, they shed tears as they read, and they felt a trepidation of *Julie*’s death that drove them to illness. They spoke of the depth of their feeling for the characters, and for Rousseau by extension. Through such correspondence with Rousseau, readers shared their earnest, heartfelt experiences of reading—the pleasure and affinity that *Julie* had inspired. What the sentimental reading in the information press makes clear is that readers’ responses to Rousseau were not exceptional in their depth of feeling. And while many readers confided only in a novel’s author or in their personal diaries, some shared their responses in their local newspaper.

The influence of sentimental epistolary novels was so moving for some writers that they wrote to the papers to clarify what happened in fictional worlds, just as they clarified reports of current events. One anonymous writer to the *Journal de Paris* reacted to a recent description in the paper of the tableau designed by Mademoiselle la Ville, which depicted a scene from Richardson’s *Clarissa*. The letter identified what the writer called a “double error,” for the newspaper had misrepresented the plot by describing the tableau as Clarissa’s brother leaving to fight the villain Lovelace. As the writer put it, “everyone knows” that Clarissa’s brother had dueled Lovelace at the outset of the novel, and it was in fact her cousin, Colonel Morden, who killed Lovelace. The second error was the newspaper’s description of the tableau itself, which depicted a scene between Morden and Clarissa. While the record in question was a fictional story, the writer had decided that the epistolary novel was important enough that the newspaper ought to make sure the story was presented faithfully.

Invited into the interior lives of fictional figures via the familiar letters that made up the novel, readers formed emotional ties with characters whose most intimate thoughts and experiences were known to them. Moreover, the protagonists in such novels were ordinary people—people like the readers themselves. Lynn Hunt has compellingly suggested that the immediacy and intensity of readers’ engagement with the novels they read made them more sympathetic to the lives of others, more moral, and, indeed, more capable of inventing human rights. As the letters to the editor illustrate, some readers felt so strongly about what they had read that they wrote to the newspaper to share their personal investment in novels. Writers felt a responsibility to get the story right, even when that story was a novel.

Especially in the case of Rousseau, the affinity for a protagonist extended to the novel’s author. Jean-Jacques Rousseau prompted heartfelt responses
from the newspaper-reading public, especially in the months after his death. The playwright and novelist Claude Joseph Dorat wrote to the *Journal de Paris* to reflect on the personal impact of Rousseau’s memoirs on his own life. In his letter to the editor, he said that he had conveyed the same letter privately to a woman of his acquaintance. Sharing a familiar letter as a public one, Dorat blurred the lines between life and epistolary fiction in much the same way that Rousseau had in his novels. One particularly vivid account of Rousseau’s impact was written by a woman who recalled being in her carriage with her husband, son, and two friends, when the conversation turned to the memory of Rousseau. For her, the shift in conversation “was enough to awaken in my soul a tender admiration” for a man she had never met. She acknowledged his profound influence on her: “I spoke of J.J. Rousseau, to whose works I owe the little that I am worth, and the principles, dare I say virtues, in which my heart loves to feed.” Then she described the moment in the carriage when “everything moved me”: her husband’s conversation, her child’s touch, which she called “the secret and pleasure of all mothers.” She described the moment of thinking of Rousseau in the carriage and taking comfort in her family as an “emotion that had deliciously occupied me” but one that she did not have the strength to pursue more deeply.

Historians of emotion remain divided on what to make of the responses of readers to the epistolary novels of the eighteenth century. William Reddy has argued that the heightened sentiment in eighteenth-century literature, such as readers who were brought to tears by a novel, was an exploitation of the power of emotional expression that readers at the time questioned as sincere. The responses to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Rousseau, and Richardson in the information press sometimes quibbled about the facts presented in the paper, but they did not question the earnestness of readers’ emotions. Instead, the emotional responses that appeared in the newspapers of the 1770s and 1780s align more closely with what Barbara Rosenwein has called “emotional communities,” where groups understood the norms for expressing such emotions and shared a consensus about which emotions had value. For eighteenth-century readers, the capacity for fellow feeling became a central virtue. In the affiches, letter writers drew on one another’s emotional repertoires as they shared their responses in the press.

**Critical Responses**

The letters to the editor also welcomed criticism, and writers often corresponded to the paper to show how actively they had read a particular work. Especially when they discussed reference works, letter writers approached
books in much the same way that they did the newspaper—as an iterative, collectively authored work where their perspective mattered. For example, a letter written in response to Jean Dubreuil’s *Dictionnaire lyrique portatif* recommended revisions for the next edition of the volume. The letter writer in Le Puy-en-Velay suggested an updated version include new opera pieces, but also more varied musical forms: ariettas, vaudeville, and romances ought to all appear in the *Dictionnaire*, each with a short preceding analysis. He generally approved of the organizational structure of the volume, but he asked the author for more guidance. The writer also recommended clear titles of the *pièces de théâtre* at the top of the corresponding pages, uniform page layouts, and alphabetical tables of contents at the end of each volume listing all pieces by title and by the first few lines of verse.  

The calls for more labels, tables, and illustrations in the letters to the editor reflected the interests of readers who desired information that was ordered, standardized, and clear—tools that would lend a volume to easy consultation. Writers such as the critic of Dubreuil’s *Dictionnaire* also expressed the notion that a book was a provisional work that could and should change. Even Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* relied on the assumption that its readers would interpret and improve on it. In a similar manner, a certain “D. R.” wrote to the *Journal de Paris* to note the limits in a definition he had read in the recently published book *Mélanges tirés d’une grande bibliothèque*. In general, he found it to be a useful and well-made volume, one that “replaced a crowd of absolutely useless books.” By identifying errors in a book that he esteemed, he sought to enhance future editions so that the editor could place in the book “all the perfection he can give it.” In their responses in the press, such writers approached books as objects that would change, and they took it on themselves to participate in formulating such changes.

In their critiques of books, most writers underscored that they read carefully, and they focused their letters on flagging the errors they found. One of the *Journal général de France*’s subscribers was hopeful that in a new edition, he would find “one pure source that one can draw from with confidence,” in an encyclopedia that contained “neither the lies, exaggerations, nor the big errors that disfigure the old.” The search for comprehensive and trustworthy sources preoccupied many. Writers contacted the affiches routinely to rectify errors that they found, especially when those errors concerned the reputation of an author. For example, after the *Affiches de Rennes* had printed a fable, which the paper attributed to a M. Fron., readers wrote letters to the editor explaining that the fable was in fact the work of the Abbé Aubert, who had published it at least thirty years earlier. Other letters warned about subscribing to volumes that would never be published, counterfeit volumes
of the posthumously collected works of known authors, or unauthorized changes to an author’s book. The concern with the authority and validity of information presented in books and newspapers surfaced in the letters to the editor.

While most writers chose to share portrayals of themselves as confident readers and curators of the information they consumed, some revealed instead the uncertainty that troubled their reading. As one writer to the Parisian Journal général de France put it, “I read exactly, yet sometimes I do not understand what the author is trying to say.” He complained to the editor of the problems of learning the specialized vocabulary as he made his way through the Nouvelles éphémérides économiques, and of discerning whether an individual author was sincere or joking. The challenge of parsing truth from wit was shared by a writer who warned in his letter about reading the English-language General Advertiser, “One must be careful to not mistake a joke for a fact.” For some eighteenth-century writers such as Anthony Collins, the concept of ordering knowledge was itself a joke.

The sense of overwhelm generated by print was not new in the eighteenth century. As Ann Blair’s work has shown, the feeling there was too much to know had grown so pressing by the sixteenth century that European scholars devised all manner of management techniques in an effort to organize the information explosion that print technology had intensified. In the information press of the eighteenth century, letter writers voiced similar feelings. One anonymous subscriber wrote to the paper to express the challenge of keeping track of all of the new books published, especially those produced beyond French borders. The sense of confusion or information overload that readers expressed reflected larger processes. In France alone, the number of books published after 1750 increased by 113 percent over the total number of books produced in the first half of the century. By the eve of the French Revolution, the number of books in a given household had risen substantially, and the range of subject matter had diversified.

Moreover, the audiences who accessed the inundation of print had expanded. Literacy had risen slowly over the century. Among men, literacy throughout the kingdom had reached 50 percent by 1789; historians estimate the percentage of women who could read was much lower. Literacy rates for urban and rural notables were much higher than the averages for France as a whole. Especially in Paris, some members of the working classes,
and domestic servants in particular, bought and shared books with one
another. The social composition of the French readership had expanded
by the end of the eighteenth century.

How readers acted on their feelings of information overload were sig-
nificant too. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, early modern read-
ers interacted with books in a variety of ways, and such differing styles of
reading were in part a response to the overabundance of books. The read-
ers of the eighteenth-century press adopted individual and collective strate-
gies for, to borrow Blair’s term, “processing” new knowledge. Writers to
the affiches made choices about what was worth knowing and what made
knowledge trustworthy. The following chapters will show that book knowl-
edge was but one source of authority among many in the information press.

Interpreting Verse

When writers to the affiches discussed reading closely, they often turned to
poetry. Poems and theatrical works written in verse composed 19.5 percent
of all the works cited in the information press in the sampled years. The
prevalence of verse in such discussions was in part owing to the four-page
format of the newspaper itself, which no doubt privileged reprinting and
discussing short excerpts. One writer noted that composing a letter to the
editor required one keep their critique concise, since “your journal does not
lend itself to long dissertations.” But the public interest in poetry was not
simply a product of verse suiting the length of the paper.

Writers included excerpts from poems that meant something to them,
and they asked the editors to print the lines they found particularly interest-
ing or charming. They commented on poems that made them feel deeply,
even when such feelings were painful. Others described local provincial pro-
grams and prizes dedicated to the recitation and analysis of poetry. Events
and festivities prompted creative responses in the newspapers. A letter writer
named De Varennes was so inspired by a poem he had read in the affiches
that he had written some verses of his own, which he asked the editors to
print. François-Jean Willemain d'Abancourt even wrote his letter to the edi-
tor in the form of a poem. In citing particular titles, writing out full verses,
and commenting on poetry, such letters illustrated how readers participated
in literary conversations. By situating those conversations in general infor-
mation newspapers, they invited a wide readership to respond with them.

Some of the poems cited in the information press were well-known clas-
sics, such as the translations of Homer’s Iliad that multiple readers discussed
in the Parisian newspapers. An anonymous writer praised Charles-Joseph
Loeillard d’Avrigny’s and Pierre-Nicolas André-Murville’s adaptations of the *Iliad*. The writer admired Murville’s verse, noting its beauty, noble style, and pleasing form. The writer selected and shared excerpts that communicated both the depth of feeling between the characters and the detailed description captured by the author. In his or her estimation, what distinguished great poets was a talent for description. Some letter writers acknowledged they lacked the reading knowledge of Greek or Latin to evaluate the accuracy of such translations. For example, in his letter to the editors, the “Marquis de V**” responded that the latest translation of the *Iliad* was written in a lively style which had inspired his enthusiasm for the epic. And yet the marquis found much to criticize in Homer’s work. He did not care for the morals of the gods or heroes, whom he found cruel and deceitful. Rather than offering a close reading of a particular passage, he expressed instead his lack of interest in the characters: “Don’t we have the right to be a bit tired of Agamemnon’s family?” The marquis’s letter highlighted that readers approached even widely read works with disparate aims and preferences in mind.

Later that year, a certain Salaun wrote to the *Journal général de France* to convey his satisfaction with the newspaper’s rigorous reviews of literary works, especially in light of what he saw as the “mediocrity of modern productions.” And yet, in the critiques that the newspaper had published of the *Iliad*, Salaun believed the paper had gone too far. Salaun’s assessment was no doubt an effort on his part to appear knowledgeable to other readers. He did not describe his own process of reading. Nevertheless, his letter suggested the differing levels of background knowledge that subscribers brought to the paper. His comments also showed that he understood not all readers would interpret literary merit in the same way.

As the letters to the editor on Homer’s *Iliad* revealed, discussions of poetry at times assumed a certain level of education, both a know-how for reading verse and a familiarity with Latin (and in the case of Homer, Greek). Even discussions of current events could turn on such skills. For example, in celebration of the demonstration of a steam engine at Jacques-Constantin and Auguste Charles Périer’s workshop in Chaillot, an anonymous writer to the newspaper in Marseille reacted with a Latin couplet. His letter was a close reading of two lines, which included a discussion of the syntactical errors in the couplet. He lamented how difficult it was to write verse that was both pleasing to hear and precise in its meaning. This was a common complaint in the affiches. In a letter to the affiches in Compiègne, the poet and writer François-Félix Nogaret noted the difficulties that students and Racine alike had faced in setting their sentiments to verse without “the help of several superfluous words.”
Nevertheless, the writer in Marseille noted that the steam engine in Chaillot and the Latin couplet it had inspired “had reawakened the Latin muses of the kingdom,” as more people had tried their hand at writing verses on the same subject. The letter ended with five exemplary Latin couplets gathered for the occasion, which he presented “without criticism or praise” for the readers of the paper to evaluate. As the affinity for Latin verses in letters to the affiches indicated, many newspaper readers had the requisite education to participate in such conversations and, from time to time, write a few lines of poetry of their own. Moreover, the invitation of the letter concerning steam engines and Latin verse made clear that letter writers discussed poetry in the paper, at least in part, so that their fellow newspaper readers could participate.

Most of the poems cited in the information press appeared in only one letter, but Voltaire’s epic poem *La Henriade* was an exception to this trend. Originally published in 1723, it was distributed throughout the century in new critical editions, including a bilingual version of the poem in Latin and French in 1772 that made the work suitable for teaching in school; it was included in a collection for the dauphin’s education in 1790, which further solidified its status as a classic of French literature. Some writers to the affiches were so confident that the poem’s prestige spoke for itself that they referred to Voltaire not by name but rather as *La Henriade’s* author. Citing *La Henriade* and *Mérope* in particular, one writer described Voltaire’s “ardent love of justice and humanity that burst forth in all of his good works.” Like the writers who responded to novels in the press, this contributor noted Voltaire’s ability to convey emotion and inspire virtue in the reader.

Other references in the information press to Voltaire’s epic poem focused on the poem’s style, structure, and originality. Pierre Laureau de Saint-André quoted two verses from *La Henriade* in his letter to the *Affiches de Dijon*, which was later printed in abridged form in the *Journal général de France*. Laureau noted that Voltaire’s description of Rome, which was recognized by some critics as a particular beauty of the work and by others as a bombastic phrase, was not Voltaire’s work at all but rather Godeau’s *Epistle to My Library*, which he had “read with the greatest surprise” and recognition. He suggested that Voltaire had “drawn” Godeau’s work “from the dust.” Whatever the origin of the particular verse, his letter shows how readers consulted new works in ways that were informed by what they had read before.

An anonymous writer to the affiches in Metz likewise used comparison, in this case to read *La Henriade* and Jean-François de Saint-Lambert’s *Les Saisons* side by side. The writer began by noting the importance of learning to read well and acknowledged that verse and prose demanded different attentions and skills of the reader. Moreover, reading well required attending to the
sounds and cadence of a verse. Citing full verses of Saint-Lambert and Voltaire, the writer compared each author’s modes of expression in describing a gathering storm, a feat that Saint-Lambert accomplished in thirty verses while Voltaire dedicated only six to the subject. By presenting two poems side by side, the writer to the Affiches des Trois-Evêchés et Lorraine invited the newspaper’s consumers to read along with her.\textsuperscript{78} Voltaire’s ability to communicate his ideas efficiently in verse caught the attention of multiple writers. In his letter to the editor, the writer and future revolutionary Jean-Louis Castilhon held up Voltaire’s Henriade as an example of economy of expression, even as he noted it contained some four thousand verses.\textsuperscript{79} The letters to the editor concerning poetry fit within the information press because of their short format and because they invited responses from other readers. By publishing letters from their readers that invited the public to read and interpret a particular passage, the affiches became an important space for reading together.

**Social Reading**

How the men and women who wrote letters to the editor understood their contribution to a newspaper was shaped by reading practices that often took place in shared spaces, where the written word was transmitted orally, and where the audience discussed information they heard. There was a range of such spaces dedicated to collective reading during the late eighteenth century, which varied according to one’s geographic location and social status. As chapter 1 has shown, venues for collective reading increased the overall circulation of the information press. The content of the letters shows how the habits of reading and writing to the press forged new social practices.

In both Parisian and provincial centers, reading was both a means of conveying information and a way of participating in society. In a letter to the Affiches de Normandie, a woman advocated against a reading room in her town, which she feared would exclude women and provide a venue for only men to socialize. She asserted that access to information and the discussion of such information among both men and women of the town was essential to the social life of her community. Citing the popularity of summer gatherings, she explained, “The men and women assemble. We converse, play games, dance sometimes, but above all we talk about the news; not only news of the state, but of our city and neighborhoods and other nearby places. There is nothing more delicious than this sort of news. . . . It is in the little towns where one finds the fine flower of critique.”\textsuperscript{80} While opening a reading room in town would foster the fascination with news, her letter to the editor underscored the social and gendered disparities that such
a space would intensify. For her part, she sought to preserve a space where men and women could cultivate the habits of criticism and conversation together.

Criticism was perhaps as much an indication of the social status and refinement with which the writer identified as it was a reflection of her interest in the intellectual life of the town. Nevertheless, her letter underscored the centrality of print in the social lives of the urban elite. As literacy rates rose in the eighteenth century, one’s ability to read no longer served as a clear marker of social status. Instead, how and what people in one’s social circle were reading grew in significance among notables. The attention to the circulation of local news within elite society also reflected the practices cultivated in salons, where reading aloud functioned not only as a form of entertainment but also as a way to invite novelty. Such was the case when salonnières invited writers to share their new work, such as the marquise de la Vaupalière, who invited sixty guests to her home to hear Beaumarchais read selections from his *Mariage de Figaro*, or Madame du Deffand, who welcomed her friends to la Harpe’s reading of *Barmécides*. While salonnières were particularly well-known figures who invited their guests to read aloud, such practices were shared by many. One anonymous writer to the *Journal de Paris* described the commonplace practice in his social circle, where men were called on to recite verses before company. To prepare for such an occasion, he thought it best to reflect on the verses one would recite, as continually exercising one’s ear could inure the speaker to the feeling verse communicated. Reading new works together fostered conversation and fused social ties. Discussing such practices in the information press underscored their significance.

Men and women read aloud in all manner of public spaces, such as coffeehouses, halls, reading rooms, gardens, and concerts. Eighteenth-century books on elocution in religious and secular settings alike emphasized the importance of tone, gesture, and other nonverbal cues, because the aim of reading aloud was to communicate feelings. Some readers of the information press suggested that newspaper editors provide even more spaces for such readings to take place. One letter writer named Colleville explained that his eyesight was beginning to fail him, so he asked the editors to facilitate public readings by printing his letter. He hoped that others interested in public readings on various genres could find one another via the newspaper, and perhaps together they would establish such a service. “I love reading,” he wrote. “It has always been my principal occupation.” For Colleville, reading together was a practical solution to the loss of his vision and a remedy against social isolation.
But especially among elite men and women, the home was an important locus for social reading. In the eighteenth century, those who could afford to do so dedicated one of the rooms in their home to a library, where the family and their guests gathered to read collectively in the evenings. The father of a student named Lili Rosset made it his habit to read the paper in the young letter writer’s presence. Rosset’s was not the only letter that featured families reading together. One subscriber to the *Journal de Paris* described his practice of reading with his wife, mother-in-law, and children each morning. As he explained, his eldest daughter would read aloud to everyone, and then each member of the family shared their own reflection about the reading. After recalling the previous day’s passage, the children compared and pondered the two texts and asked their father questions. He noted how their faces lit up as they enjoyed the daily activity, leading him to conclude they learned without effort. The writer echoed the ideas of François Fénelon, John Locke, and Charles Rollin, who believed that a child’s reading should amuse while offering instruction—that children should be enticed to love learning. Didactic literature read as a family at home cultivated self-control in children, instructed behavioral norms, and prepared children to participate in society. The letter writer who described reading together each day understood reading and discussion as a foundation for his children’s intellectual and social growth.

Readers also took their books and newspapers outside with them to read together. In their gardens and on their walks, picnics, and longer voyages, readers brought along a book to share. The letter to the editor critiquing Dubreuil’s *Dictionnaire* focused on the need for the book to be published in a “convenient and portable format” and at a reasonable price. In short, the material form of a book affected who would be able to read it and where. In a similar manner, the accessibility and portability of the short-format newspaper made it ideal for transport. Social reading was widespread in eighteenth-century cultural life, and the affiches were an important virtual space to carry out the practices of reading together. What set the forum of letters to the editor apart from other reading spaces was its capacity to reach so many participants.

The letters to the editor were a venue for social reading that flourished in the 1770s and 1780s, where writers could reach a wider audience. Their references to books and to one another speak both to the relevance of specific kinds of works in their debates and to larger questions about the range of subject matter that was up for debate. Referencing books was a way for members of the newspaper-reading public to participate in the literary life.
of the age. Through their citations of books, pamphlets, and verse, they signaled to their fellow readers the larger network of print that they read alongside the affiches.

Writers cited works of literature, especially reference works, novels, and poetry. Books on the sciences and the arts also appeared in their letters, composing nearly a third of all references. History publications covered the history of France, antiquity, and the wider world. Books concerning jurisprudence and theology appeared much less frequently; together such books constituted less than 6 percent of all the titles referenced in the press. Rather than returning to the same titles again and again, most letter writers introduced books that no other writer mentioned. The array of titles cited in letters suggested the capacious interests that readers brought to the periodicals. Moreover, the fact that literary discussion took place in general information newspapers at all is noteworthy.

More significant than what they read, the letters show how newspaper readers responded to books and other print matter. The forum of the newspaper enabled letter writers to begin conversations about books with other readers. Such conversations were no doubt amplified and extended into other reading circles throughout the kingdom, where collective reading practices and habits of discussing books were widespread. The debates about print matter in the information press equipped readers with new habits of mind, which they would bring to their discussions of popular science, rural reform, and social welfare. As the following chapters demonstrate, citing a book was but one method letter writers would adopt to present evidence and make their case.

The letters revealed the avid engagement of newspaper readers with print media. And yet we know the mind is not merely soft wax onto which ideas are stamped; reading was a complex and creative process. The responses that men and women offered in the affiches about reading are thus particularly rich. Writers characterized the newspapers both as a space where readers could discuss and debate what they had read and as a public record that offered instruction to the community. As a writer to the Affiches de Toulouse publicizing his Literary and Patriotic Society in the town of Gimont explained, the purpose of the literary society he had founded in particular, was to share their work and to inspire “the love of the useful.” The letters to the editor serve as a remarkable record of the responses to a growing body of print media by a wide readership. At the same time, the letter writers made claims about what such knowledge was for. The impulse to create and share useful knowledge, as the writer from Gimont emphasized, would become the guiding ethos of the information press.