Chapter 7

Communicating the Revolution

Joly, a lieutenant colonel of the Garde Citoyenne in Plancy-sur-Aube, wrote to his local newspaper in Troyes in December 1789 to suggest that he was living through a remarkable moment in history. He argued that all of the paper’s readers had a role to play in the Revolution “taking place among us,” and so he called on all “citoyens éclairés” reading the paper to dedicate themselves to the public good. Joly believed that the Revolution could only attain a salutary end by the efforts and sacrifices of its citizens, so he wrote a letter to the editor. He linked the patriotic actions in the small town where he lived to the efforts of the National Assembly that he admired. He reasoned that it was only natural that patriotism and ardent zeal would lead the affiches’ readers to support the Revolution.¹ In less than a year of revolution, the letters published in the information press had become a forum for political discussions like Joly’s. In much the same way as they had participated in balloon launches, potato harvests, or beneficent recipe sharing, writers emphasized that they had a role to play in the unfolding Revolution. The information press that had generally avoided politics now ushered it in. As they navigated their experiences of the Revolution, writers relied on norms they had been building for two decades. Appeals to the public good remained the framework for justifying one’s letter. Like so much of the explanations for acting beneficently, the politics of the Revolution were made local and personal.
Joly’s correspondence was emblematic of the optimism that had for two decades appeared in the letters to the affiches. The new practices of dialogue honed by writers in the information press and the pervasive habits they had built in order to argue for practical, incremental changes at the local level had prepared the writing public to participate in the Revolution. At the same time, the media landscape the information press inhabited had changed utterly, as hundreds of new, uncensored publications entered the marketplace in 1789 and thereafter. The affiches, once the only licensed general information newspapers for a given town, by and large adapted to the Revolution and continued to publish at least until 1791.

This chapter traces the experiences of writers who participated in the Revolution via the affiches. As censorship fell away, writers voiced their political opinions openly in the general information newspapers. The forum of letters to the editor in the early years of the Revolution continued to publish lively correspondence concerning the arts and sciences, agriculture, and bienfaisance. But even more so, letter writers continued to bring to bear the habits of mind to question, to debate, and to establish their own authority to speak on new questions concerning the Revolution. Writers debated the meaning of the revolutionary events in which they participated. Deputies in the National Assembly used the press to foster conversation with their constituents. Writers raised questions about the impacts of national policies on their particular town. Taken as a whole, the letters to the editor reveal both the widespread engagement of the writing public with the Revolution and the contested, negotiated responses to the events in which they participated.

The letters to the editor published in the early years of the Revolution reveal the lived experiences of writers who navigated far greater access to information. In the prerevolutionary information press, debates over who had published a particular pamphlet, book, or letter to the editor had become matters of personal and public concern. In the eighteenth century, honor had become a salient signifier as social distinctions had become less legible. During the Revolution such preoccupations would only intensify. The writers to the affiches in 1790 and 1791 increasingly noted that their letter was in response to a rumor and concerned their personal reputation. When the letters dwindled sharply in the autumn of 1791, as the deputies attempted to regulate the press, the crisis over authority and personal honor had reached a fever pitch.

Letter writers adapted the repertories of establishing authority they had honed together in the affiches in the 1770s and 1780s to the new social and political realities of revolution. Through the letters to the editor, many writers who would not hold public office learned to become revolutionaries.
Previous scholarship on the history of the revolutionary press has focused on what Hugh Gough has called the “campaigning journalist,” an individual writer who participated in revolutionary events and used his newspaper in the service of his political campaigns. Historians have devoted monographs to the best-known journalist revolutionaries who worked in this campaigning style, especially Camille Desmoulins, Jacques Pierre Brissot, Jean-Paul Marat, and Jacques-René Hébert. While most of the “campaigning journalists” were affiliated with the Cordeliers and Jacobin clubs, conservative journalists and their newspapers are also well studied. Historians of the conservative press have shown that editors likewise invited their partisan readers to respond to newspaper content, and readers participated enthusiastically. Many of these journalists held public office, and their lives and writings have been well documented.

As the new revolutionary newspapers found a clear journalistic voice, the information press remained more varied, informed by the personal and at times contradictory responses to the events unfolding before the writing public. As they continued to publish letters to the editor, the affiches show the ways that readers processed the early years of the Revolution. Writers continued to debate one another in the shared venue of the affiches, even as newspapers across the political spectrum began to publish. This chapter focuses on writers who, for the most part, were not prominent revolutionaries but nevertheless shaped the early years of the Revolution.

The Evolution of the Revolutionary Affiches

News of the Revolution of 1789 arrived in the French information press in a piecemeal fashion. For the first time in the domestic newspapers, editorial opinions appeared that ranged from the radical to the archconservative, and readers’ responses to the events of the Revolution were just as varied. As censorship began to fall away in 1788–89, editors ventured into political coverage by running columns on key events and printing letters from their readers on political matters. From July 5, 1788, censorship effectively ended on pamphlets, when Loménie de Brienne, the king’s chief finance minister, issued a decree inviting the public to share their opinions on the procedures that would guide the Estates General. Censorship of newspapers collapsed over the ensuing months as printers began to comment on the preparations for the Estates General. On May 19, 1789, the crown tried to reassert its power to regulate political news by authorizing the Journal de Paris, the Mercure, and the Gazette de France to print reports on the Estates General approved by a royal censor. Provincial affiches were permitted to reprint the reports
published in the Parisian papers. Between May 20 and 23, the deputies took up the question of press freedom, but after discussing the possibility of publishing their own periodical, they ultimately decided not to do so. In his study of the revolutionary press, Hugh Gough suggests that it was this decision by the deputies that marked a turning point after which newspaper producers assumed they could print freely.7

From this point, letter writers to the affiches spoke for the first time in a free press. In the *Journal de Paris*, letters in the form of proposed *cahiers de doléances* and correspondence written in anticipation of the calling of the Estates General began appearing in April and May. On April 1 a future deputy from the Third Estate who identified himself by the initials C. D. described the local elections in Senlis and asserted that “distinctions in rank necessary for the social order will merge within the unanimity of our sentiments.”8 In his discussion of the *cahiers* drawn up by each estate, he reflected the widespread optimism felt by many that reform was possible. Throughout the late spring, writers began to test the waters on political subjects. Despite their cautious tone, early accounts expressed excitement about the calling of the Estates General. The discussion of the fiscal crisis and the mobilization for the election of deputies permeated the information press in Caen, Metz, Orleans, Poitiers, Rennes, Rouen, Toulouse, and Troyes. Correspondence concerning local and regional government, taxation, privilege, and the future of the nation increased notably in late 1788 and into 1789.9

At the same time as the range of opinions in the affiches grew, the newspapers printed fewer letters to the editor. Across a sample of the newspapers published in Amiens, Angers, Arras, Caen, Dijon, Marseille, Paris, Rouen, and Troyes, the total letters published in 1789, 1790, and 1791 were 423, 289, and 190, respectively, as compared to the 424 total letters published in 1788 and 306 total letters in 1786. Beginning in May 1789, editors dedicated more of their newspapers to covering the Estates General and, after June 17, to the National Assembly. The *Journal de Paris* did so on a daily basis. The coverage of political news in the Assembly often took up the first page or two of the short four-page newspapers. Everywhere readers were eager to learn more about the events transpiring in the Assembly and the transformations undertaken by the people of Paris and other metropolitan centers. In order to make room for expanding columns on political news, the rest of the newspaper’s contents—including letters to the editor—were condensed or cut.

Moreover, newspapers proliferated in 1789. One hundred and forty new periodicals were published that year in Paris alone.10 Each paper took a political position that could hew more closely to their readers’ interests. Many of them also included correspondence from their readers. Letters did not cease
to appear in the affiches in 1789, but they quickly became but one element in a dynamic body of conversations about the Revolution. As editors grew increasingly confident that censorship had fallen for good, they printed correspondence that reflected their own views and those of their readers.

**Old Regime Continuities**

By the summer of 1789, censorship had entirely collapsed, and the affiches freely printed letters on political matters. The Revolution garnered sustained attention in the press, but politics was by no means the only topic people wrote about. Letters concerning bienfaisance, agriculture, the sciences, and arts and letters, which had formed the majority of content prior to 1789, persisted during the period of 1789–91. In a quantitative analysis of a sample of four newspapers, discussions of politics composed just over a third of the correspondence published between 1789 and 1791.\(^{11}\) For the majority of writers to the affiches, their correspondence remained preoccupied with implementing practical, incremental social and technological improvements at the local level.

Writers continued to share their work in the sciences via the information press. Much as chapter 4 illustrated, engineers and amateur scientists wrote letters to the editor to publicize their new inventions and to invite critiques from the public. They announced the new inventions as useful technical breakthroughs. The projects pitched in the press included a pump to extract the water in wells, a mechanism to improve the efficiency of mills, and a table to enable clerks to write as fast as one could speak.\(^{12}\) Other contributions on scientific topics were more observational in nature, covering the different readings gleaned from thermometers, documenting the behavior of squirrels, or relaying the success of a putty used to waterproof cellars.\(^{13}\) In Amiens, for example, Buissart corresponded with his fellow *physiciens* over the accuracy of hygrometers in the affiches.\(^{14}\) Debates concerning the sciences persisted into the 1790s.

Agriculture also remained a prominent topic in the letters to the editor. Letter writers focused on how to mitigate the grain shortages that were widely reported in the countryside in 1789. As early as January, letters suggesting recipes for bread that could compensate for the shortage of grains appeared. Potatoes—even the frozen ones—one writer assured, could be used to make bread.\(^{15}\) Reports on frozen grains and the related shortages continued into the summer. A letter from Tessier mailed from the experimental royal farm at Rambouillet reported that despite the hardship of the winter, the writer firmly believed conditions were improving: the fields seeded in
March, April, and May looked healthy and abundant. In the countryside surrounding Dijon, writers to the affiches discussed the local 1,200-livre prize at stake for the farmer who brought the most wheat to market over the 1789–90 winter. Reports on mitigating diseases in livestock also persisted into the Revolution. The interest of the writing public in agricultural questions was sustained throughout the period.

Letters documenting bienfaisance also continued to appear in the newspaper throughout the early years of the Revolution, where writers raised awareness for groups in need of assistance, solicited the support of their fellow readers, and provided examples of model bienfêteurs and bienfâtreuses. Some of the published contributions served as documentation of donations to beneficent organizations, such as an association in Marseille to support poor sailors and their families, or M. de Boissy’s Compagnie de MM. de Charité in Paris. Others focused on the bienfaisance enacted by priests or landlords, such as the seigneur of Thoste in Burgundy, who provided for the subsistence of some fifty-six poor families in the region. Letters to the editor concerning bienfaisance remained as prevalent in 1789 as they had been before the Revolution.

During the winter of 1789–90, the information press also continued the prerevolutionary trend of portraying bienfaisance as good citizenship, and writers even portrayed the royal family as good citizens who enacted bienfaisance. Letters detailing the queen’s charity in a sympathetic light appeared throughout the period of 1789–91. Such accounts painted a portrait of the royal family as model benefactors who were aware of and responsive to the needs of the people. In August 1789, a writer noted that when Versailles experienced grain shortages, and lines stretched between thirty and forty people deep at the bakeries, the king and queen ordered that they did not want any pastries for themselves or their households. In the affiches the royal family were cast as responsive and bienfaisante, and letters to the editor concerning the royal family reflected a generally favorable opinion of them that persisted until their attempted flight in June 1791.

In 1790 and 1791 bienfaisance appeared in letters to the editor less frequently. Letters documenting model benefactors decreased, and in their place writers covered organizations. Such groups used the newspaper page to display transparency in the receiving and spending of donations. At least in Paris, this decline in beneficent letters reflected the influence of Dominique-Joseph Garat as an editor of the Journal de Paris; he did not share the other editors’ penchant for philanthropic subjects. In most of the affiches, the editorial leadership did not change in this period. The shift in their coverage
of bienfaisance after 1790 likely reflected the space constraints editors faced as they adapted their weekly newspapers to a more competitive marketplace.

The history of the information press after 1789 is, in part, one of continuity, for writers expressed many of the same preoccupations with literature, the sciences and arts, agriculture and bienfaisance that they had in previous years. Politics were a growing part, but not the only part, of the conversation. After all, many of the revolutionary affiches were published by the editors who had held the Old Regime privilège to publish the paper. The editorial responses once censorship had fallen varied. While some editors became staunch supporters of the Revolution, others viewed events in Paris warily and maintained a more conservative approach to the coverage of political events by refusing to print opinion pieces. Jean Milcent, for example, eventually gave up his affiches in Rouen and moved to Paris to focus instead on the arts. André Villot in Dijon adapted his coverage to suit the political climate of the moment and continued to publish into the Directory. While their politics varied, in the early years of the Revolution the editors maintained the publication of letters from their readers. Writers throughout France continued to turn to the affiches to debate issues that were of importance to them.

Writing Revolutionary Events

To read the letters to the editor in this period is to trace the political education of a wide spectrum of figures who participated in revolutionary events. In their letters, writers processed the experience of rapid political and social change. The experience for them was both exciting and disconcerting, and they highlighted the contingent nature of the early months of the Revolution. Moreover, the letters to the affiches show that members of the general public debated what particular moments meant, and they brought that contentiousness to the press. They shared a concern with offering a personal, up-close record of what they had witnessed. Writers did not always reach the same conclusions about the significance of revolutionary journées, especially in the summer of 1789.

Revolutionary events appeared in the affiches after the storming of the Bastille on July 14. In Paris especially, writers focused on the presence of street crowds, which they generally depicted as immense and uncontrollable. On August 5, a letter signed “L. C. D. L.” recounted the day when the Bastille was taken. According to the writer, caught up in the moment, the crowd tried to destroy nearby buildings, and they succeeded in breaking doors and windows. Such looting incidents do not appear in the standard
accounts of the Bastille; the heavy rain on the evening of July 14 forced most of those involved to take shelter or go home. Nevertheless, the letter asserting that looting had taken place praised the chevalier de Laizer, who led his soldiers to defend the neighborhood and set up guards “to avoid disorder and pillaging that was beginning to reach its height.” Whether the letter was authored by de Laizer himself is plausible but unknown. While the letter provided no evidence that looting actually transpired, it articulated an anxiety about spontaneous collective action. Descriptions in the papers of being swept up into a massive crowd gave an impression of the summers’ events as unsettling and powerful. While historians have found that the symbol of the Bastille was clarified by the press that summer as events unfolded, the vantage point of the affiches reveals a more iterative process as letters writers considered its significance.

The July 22 murder of the two Old Regime officials, the controller-general of finances, Joseph Foullon de Doué, and his son-in-law, the intendant of Paris, Louis-Bénigne-François Bertier de Sauvigny, that occurred the week following the Bastille’s fall was outlined in detail by another anonymous letter published on July 25. The writer described the crowd that convened on the Place de Grève before the Hôtel de Ville, the site of executions under the Old Regime: “The tumultuous movements spread in an immense crowd that filled the square. Monsieur the Mayor, accompanied by many Electeurs, came down to the multitude and endeavored to calm them. The calm did not last long; new cries of death could be heard.” The eyewitness accounts of the events of July 14, but especially those of July 22, communicated the shock that the deputies and many Parisians felt. The letters to the editor published in the immediate aftermath of these events show writers who struggled in the moment with how to interpret crowd action.

Letters published after the taking of the Bastille also portrayed the revolutionary crowds as knowledgeable, legitimate, and well organized. On July 17 a letter appeared in the Journal de Paris comparing the emergence from the crowd of capable political speakers to the birth of a fully armed Minerva springing from Jupiter’s brain. One of the earliest depictions of collective action was printed in the Journal de Paris on July 19, portraying a peaceful crowd of women with a clear agenda. A M. Jacquinot, the secretary of the St-Etienne-du-Mont district where the events transpired, wrote a letter describing the women’s actions. The market women of the Place Maubert were invited to participate in the mass at the Église Sainte-Geneviève, where they placed a bouquet adorned with ribbons near the shrine of Saint Geneviève’s relics. They refused any gifts, and instead demanded “bread and liberty for the people.” Market women such as the Dames des Halles used “liberty”
as a demand that referenced specific marketplace issues that affected their business, such as the freedom to sell in public spaces, or the freedom to rent from multiple shelter providers. Women’s collective action also tended to center around the neighborhood where they lived and worked. Their political and commercial agency within the neighborhood space was widely accepted throughout the eighteenth century. Jacquinot’s account made clear that the market women of the Place Maubert acted politically and that they had the moral authority to do so. The depictions published in July of revolutionary crowds in the information press show the avid interest of the writing public in the collective action they witnessed and in which they participated. Swept up in the Revolution that summer, writers shared competing reactions to what the events meant.

Over the summer of 1789, letter writers emphasized the significance of the moment through which they were living. Their accounts conveyed a sense that the Revolution harbored possibilities for imagining new communities. An anonymous letter in August called for the institution of a fête nationale to celebrate the unparalleled events of the past month and proposed a grand meal that would bring everyone together without regard for social difference:

I would like all the inhabitants of the good city of Paris to set their tables in public and take their meals in front of their houses. The rich and the poor would be united and all ranks combined. The streets, adorned with tapestries, littered with leaves and flowers, and it would be forbidden to drive through by carriage or horse. All the National Guard on foot would easily maintain order everywhere. The capital, from one end to the other, would form an immense family; we would see a million people sitting at the same table; the health of the King would be carried by the sound of all the bells, by the noise of a hundred cannon shots, the salvos of the musketry, and at the same moment in all the neighborhoods of Paris; and on that day, the nation will have its “grand couvert.”

The grand couvert was the name of the ceremonial public dinners the king and queen held at court, but this letter also prefigured a practice in revolutionary Paris, especially after 1792, of le banquet républicain or banquet fraternel, which are well known for the songs written and performed there. The writer’s vision for the future reflected the tenor of the Revolution in 1789, which celebrated the monarchy and the Revolution together. The writer also looked to newly formed revolutionary groups for leadership by depicting the emergence of the National Guard as a capable and patriotic police force.
Moreover, the celebratory nature of the letter proposing a fraternal banquet echoed sonically—with convivial conversation, toasts to the king, the ringing of bells, and the volley of artillery. The proposal also reimagined the use of public space, where the street would become a banquet hall and social rank would fall away. This letter was published on August 30, after the night of August 4 when the deputies of the Constituent Assembly renounced all manner of Old Regime privileges. As chapter 2 has shown, writers had for some time performed in the press other forms of self-description than social position. By the summer of 1789, some were prepared to dispense with distinctions based on social position entirely.

Writers such as the proposer of the fête nationale articulated a hopeful vision of the future. Their perspective differed in scope from the practical, local, and incremental changes that writers prior to the Revolution invariably articulated in their letters to the editor. Compared to the prerevolutionary correspondence, the writers who published with the affiches in 1789 and thereafter were more willing both to commend and, as we will see, to criticize the Revolution and its leaders. The portrayals of the revolutionary crowd in the wake of the taking of the Bastille reveal the rather contentious views that persisted in the affiches. The range of opinions expressed in the press show that for many, a transformation in political attitudes did not predate the Revolution but instead was shaped by their participation in it.

As the Revolution spread beyond Paris that summer, letters from the provinces documented the rumors of bands of brigands that circulated in late July and August. The Great Fear traveled by word of mouth, spreading in waves throughout the kingdom in a matter of days beginning in mid-July. In fact, the word “brigand” characterized all manner of people deemed undesirable; the flexibility of the term may have helped the rumor spread, as its meaning could adapt to various regions and social groups. Some villages received news that groups of brigands were arriving from multiple directions, which seemed to give the rumors greater local credence and urgency. While the Great Fear spread orally, it was also covered in the information press, which tracked its movement.

Throughout July and August, rumors regarding the stockpiling of grain circulated. Oral and print cultures were again linked, as writers used the information press to denounce accusations and clear their names. One letter cosigned by procureurs-syndics in the department of Senlis in northern France tried to dispel rumors by disparaging those who were quick to believe such unfounded claims: “Credulity avidly adopts anything that malignity invents.” Having conducted interviews and inspected the region for stockpiling, the writers reported, “There is not a single grain of wheat, nor traces, nor the possibility that it had been deposited here.” In a similar letter to the editor,
Guy le Gentil, the marquis de Paroy, who served as a deputy for the nobility in the Estates General, went so far as to offer an award of 1,000 écus to anyone who could prove the calumnious rumors that he was stockpiling grain. In Normandy a series of letters to the editor concerned the circulation of rumors over the grain supply in Dieppe. Letters emphasizing loyalty to the Revolution and declaring that the writer was not stockpiling goods were common throughout July and August. Denials of grain hoarding published in the newspapers that summer are significant because they show that some nobles took the rumors that aristocrats were hoarding grain seriously enough to deny them. However, the letters stopped far short of describing these cases as symptoms of a generalized plot. In the face of the rumors that circulated in 1789, the information press adapted their long-standing practices to new purposes. They tried to provide a truthful and public record—to offer evidence that would be of use to their readers.

**Taking Part in the Revolution**

The total number of letters to the editors of the Parisian and provincial information press declined over the autumn of 1789, but the letters that did appear showed writers’ avid interest in taking part in the Revolution. In much the same style as the writers to the affiches under the Old Regime had done, letter writers explored systemic challenges in personal terms. One vivid example of this process of making revolutionary participation personal was patriotic gift giving.

Inspired by the delegation of women giving their jewelry before the Constituent Assembly the previous summer, many of the letters to the information press composed during the first winter concerned contributions to la Patrie. Thus, “a young Parisian lady who desires the general good of the Nation” asked the deputies of the Constituent Assembly to accept her gift to the nation of 2,000 livres. Referring to herself in the third person, she wrote, “Her wish would have been to present them herself to this august Assembly; but, wishing to remain unrecognized, she finds herself deprived of this honor.” In a similar letter to the Marseillaise newspaper, in which the author identified herself only as “L . . . ,” a woman reflected on the act of patriotic gift giving, which had “warmed my imagination” and prompted the reflections she enclosed. By remarking on how reading about other patriotic gifts had influenced her own, Madame L. spoke to the information press’s long-standing efforts to encourage emulation by providing noteworthy examples. The affiches still expressed their dedication to sharing useful information, and the well-being of the nation became part of that conversation.
Yet Madame L. proposed a somewhat different approach to gift giving by focusing not on a gift to the nation but rather on French commerce. After considering how she might participate in supporting the Revolution in the form of a gift, she decided she could not bear to give up her wedding ring. She instead proposed purchasing in the future only goods made in France, which she marked by the privation of “English carriages, English headscarves, English ribbons, English washbowls, and English hardware of any kind.” Henceforth she would serve her guests only on French plates and silver, and her cupboard would be devoid of English linens, knits, and buttons. As she saw it, stimulating French commerce, “to make our manufactories work, to establish new ones, and in doing so to nourish the large number of workmen who want for bread by lack of work,” would benefit the Revolution more than her wedding ring would.\(^4^4\) As citizen-consumers, she conveyed that all had a role to play in supporting the Revolution.

Writers linked their support for the Revolution to the National Assembly and to the king in their descriptions of revolutionary participation. Nau Deville, a self-described “citizen-soldier” and member of the District committee of Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois, recounted the intensity of his sentiments at a dinner party at the archbishop’s residence. The Voluntary Company of the Battalion of Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois, the Third Company, and the Committee Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois, as he told it, had all been invited to partake in the festivities. After a mass at the church of Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois, where the royal family habitually attended mass when in residence at the Tuileries Palace, the guests proceeded to the archbishop’s residence for a dinner party for some five or six hundred guests. Although in the church they had entered and exited according to their rank or order, at the dinner all such “order was broken,” and guests sat without concern for rank as a “family of Citizens.” After a moment of silence devoted to God, the quiet was broken by a general toast to the health of the king, and “cries of long live the King, long live our General, long live the Nation, rang out through the hall.” Nau Deville remarked that “it seemed we were intoxicated: indeed, we are. It is the intoxication of patriotism.”\(^4^5\) As his account illustrated, readers expressed a nascent patriotism, along with the feeling that they were being swept up in the moment of social transformation. A writer from Grenoble echoed such sentiments in his description of a public reading of the king’s speech before the National Assembly on February 4, which was met with cries of joy that echoed through the streets of Grenoble.\(^4^6\) The fusion of personal affinity for the revolution with support for the king and the nation was inscribed throughout the letters to the affiches.
In contrast to the elation of patriotic banquets, some writers emphasized the uneven emotional and physical impacts of the Revolution. One account by the doctor and founder of French psychiatry, Philippe Pinel, focused on the impact that the uncertainty of revolution had on public health. As editor of the *Gazette de santé* until it merged with the *Journal de médecine, chirurgie et pharmacie* in 1789, Pinel had cultivated a dialogue with the readers of his paper; during the Revolution he pursued his work on mental health in new professional venues. In his letter to the editors of the *Journal de Paris*, he described how the social body and individuals alike had experienced in the preceding decades “all the infirmities of a social order ready to expire, or, to use Rousseau’s expression from 1760, of a constitution which threatened France with a coming deterioration.” He saw the last decades of the Old Regime as those of a society in decay, where “the slackening in all places of society and the fatal progress of personal interest had frozen all hearts, constantly saddened and discouraged by the idea of arbitrary power.” In Pinel’s interpretation, the political and social limits of the Old Regime were borne upon the bodies of people in the form of chronic illnesses.

By January 1790 Pinel declared that France had taken on a new outlook, which began with the events in Paris and in the provinces in the summer of 1789. In describing the symptoms in the bodies of his patients, Pinel also explored the impact of the Revolution on the collective social body. He tracked what he saw as the health benefits of the Revolution on individual patients, in whom he witnessed “a calm serenity and sometimes a more or less ardent enthusiasm,” and he heard from many that since the coming of the Revolution they felt better. As far as he was concerned, the changes of 1789 had reset the balance of nature and, “as if by virtue of electricity,” reanimated the body and soul. The metaphor of the Revolution as an electric shock echoed the treatments of Franz Mesmer and the parlor experiments with electric currents that were so prevalent in the years preceding the Revolution. Pinel’s letter was popular; it was reprinted in the *Esprit des Journaux*.

At the same time, Pinel documented the vast range of effects of the Revolution on the bodies of men and women. While he found that illness in the capital had declined overall, some people suffered profoundly. He noted one man who was so tormented by “panicked terrors” that he had committed suicide. Long interested in treating mental illness, Pinel would be appointed to Bicêtre Hospital in 1793 and to Pitié-Salpêtrière in 1795. As Pinel’s letter to the editor underscored, the Revolution had come to shape every aspect of lived experience. Particularly concerned with the constitution of human
bodies, Pinel turned to the body politic in order to measure the health of the nation, and in general, he found revolution beneficial to the body and the soul. Even so, he pointed out the potential harms that social change and ensuing instability could present for individuals.

Nau Deville, the district member who described patriotism as a form of intoxication, and Pinel, the doctor who documented the bodily impact of political change, both praised the Revolution. And yet their accounts also acknowledged the ambivalence and uncertainty the Revolution harbored. The leaders of the Revolution were no more immune to the physical and psychological strain of revolution than were the observers in the press. Maximilien Robespierre’s physical bouts of illness, brought on by personal and political conflict in mid-1790, November 1792, September 1793, and February, April, and June 1794 are one well-documented example. Letters to the editor such as Pinel’s were no doubt motivated by the authors’ desire to publicize their life’s work and burnish their reputations, and, as Nina Gelbart has suggested, to offer a semblance of order in a time of disorder—to search for a new equilibrium that would remedy individual and social health. At the same time, Pinel’s description highlighted the emotional and physical impact of the Revolution on those who experienced it.

Over the first year of the Revolution, the information press had served as a key site for conversations among readers about what the unfolding Revolution meant for them. Writers’ correspondence about their participation confirmed that the Revolution was a surprise for most people. The early years of the Revolution were a period of political education, as people responded to contingent events. The writing public’s experience was consistent with what historians have previously found for the political formation that transpired in the Revolution’s early years among the deputies in the Constituent Assembly. Letters to the editor showed that the writing public adapted long-practiced habits to new uses: they invoked the paper as an important locus for useful knowledge, they offered material evidence that their fellow readers could evaluate, and they shared noteworthy examples for emulation. In short, while it is unlikely that the readers of the information press imagined the Revolution before it began, once it had begun, the repertoires on which they had long relied for all manner of practical discussions were put to political uses.

**Public Policy and the Information Press**

Over the next two years, the affiches took on the role of communicating the Revolution by publishing letters from the deputies of the Constituent
Assembly, and by printing letters from people who sought information about the local impacts of the Assembly’s policies. Deputies themselves wrote letters to the editor that functioned as brief, unofficial reports, which they sent to the editor. For example, the conservative deputy Abbé de Bonneval wrote to his constituents via the *Journal de Paris* to counter a report that said he had not been allowed to speak in the Constituent Assembly, when in fact he had indeed been permitted; he explained he had only declined to speak voluntarily so that decisions could be made more quickly. In a similar manner, the more moderate deputy Jacques-Guillaume Thouret wrote on behalf of the Constitutional Committee to correct an unreliable copy of a decree circulated in the press; he said the errors confused the document’s original meaning. Provincial affiches also published letters to the editor written by deputies. The Abbé Grégoire wrote to correct the editor of the affiches in Dijon. Jean-Jacques Duval d’Eprémesnil’s letter to the *Gazette de France* was republished by the affiches in Grenoble. In some cases, the editor initiated correspondence with the deputy, as the editor of the affiches in Arras, Barbe-Thérèse Lefebvre Marchand, did in her letter to Louis Marie, marquis d’Estourmel. Estourmel wrote back to the paper the week after Marchand asked him to comment on poor relief in the department of Pas-de-Calais in the wake of the closure of monasteries. He assured her that funds would go to the department to support local poor relief, and he emphasized that he knew the needs of those in the department. Indeed, a major aim of the letters from the deputies was communicating what the decisions made in the Constituent Assembly meant for people living in their department.

Some deputies wrote letters to the editor on a more regular basis to clarify their positions, combat rumors, and express a continued affinity for their hometown. The deputy Charles-François Bouche wrote to the *Journal de Paris* to declare his affiliation as president of the Feuillant club in 1791. The affiches in Amiens published letters to the editor from the deputy Jean-Charles Laurendeau. In his letters in 1790 and 1791 he clarified his policy positions, including his support for the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. He described his activities in the Assembly, but he also declared his willingness to return to “live and die among my concitoyens” in Amiens as soon as his duties as a deputy concluded. Laurendeau’s published missive illustrated how a deputy could use a letter to the editor in an effort to shore up support among his constituents in the provinces. To an extent, the deputies’ letters functioned in a similar manner to those addressed to editors by intendants under the Old Regime, who had asked that the papers print clarifications or announcements from time to time. But letters from the deputies were also doing something new: by addressing the readers of general information
newspapers, they expressed their interest in appealing to and developing public opinion. In Rennes, Nantes, Brest, Angers, Montauban, and Agen, correspondence from deputies to their constituents led directly to the founding of more newspapers.\(^{59}\)

For readers of the information press, the newspaper remained a trustworthy channel to clarify how the Revolution would change their lives and livelihoods. In their assessments of the impact of the Constituent Assembly’s decrees, writers expressed the sense of confidence and investment in local change that they had communicated for decades in the affiches. In their letters, writers conveyed that they had the right to criticize and discuss changes that affected them. Writers solicited clarification on how new laws might apply in their department, and they directed these inquiries to the information press. For example, Malardot, a lawyer from Dijon, wrote in to the affiches to discuss the impact of tax reforms. His letter consisted of an analysis of the law and its ramifications, and in particular the financial burden for the general public.\(^{60}\) In a similar manner in Amiens, a debate around the personal impacts of the Revolution emerged in the affiches between two men: Leroux, who held the office of *arpenteur royal* before the Revolution, and Breton. Breton made clear in his letter that all surveyors had to acquire the revolutionary government’s certification, even if they had held a royal office before the Revolution. Breton asserted that the privileges that Leroux claimed “are of the Old Regime,” and Leroux could claim no exclusive right to a suppressed office.\(^{61}\) Breton’s letter was part of a local dispute over an office he wanted, but his defense of why Leroux was no longer entitled to this post reflected the impact of the Revolution at the local level. His justification relied on a critique of privilege and the conviction that the Constituent Assembly’s authority on the question of public offices was paramount. In bringing this dispute to the affiches, he sought to settle the issue in the court of public opinion too.

Parish priests were among those who wrote to the information press to clarify how the Constituent Assembly’s decision to nationalize church land, and later to require a constitutional oath, would affect their lives and their parishioners. A letter to the editor of the *Affiches de Normandie* by Dupuys, the parish priest in Salmonville-la-Sauvage, a village northeast of Rouen, asked how the decision that church property be placed at the disposal of the nation would affect the rights of priests and the local peasantry to the fruits of trees on their land. The harsh winter had killed many of the trees, and the priest wanted to inquire about who was responsible for replanting those that had died.\(^{62}\) An English doctor named Davis also wrote to the paper to propose a method for parceling the nationalized church property that was
-inspired by the administration of city lands in London. Parish priests and villagers wrote letters to the editor in Arras the following year concerning the impacts of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Both juring and nonjuring clergy used their letters to clarify the record and make the case for their decision before the public. The revolutionary affiches allowed for writers to speak more directly than ever before to the local impacts of the policy decisions made in Paris.

For those who disagreed with local administrative decisions, writers turned to the information press to settle their complaint in the court of public opinion. For example, a contributor identified only as “one of your subscribers” wrote to question the local Commune’s mandate that the newspaper no longer publish prices for commodities sold in Dijon. The decision was made, according to the writer, out of fear that mentioning prices might lead to an increase in the cost of grain. According to the writer, the opposite had happened: the prices had increased since the paper stopped listing them. Disagreeing with the Commune, the writer argued that for the sake of the poor in the country, the prices should appear in the newspaper. The anonymous writer from Dijon did not make an argument about his rights as a citizen, but he did suggest that the paper had a responsibility to the public. Notably, the writer’s rhetoric relied on local contexts rather than appeals to the nation. When it came to what the author anticipated to be convincing, local and material explanations that writers had long practiced in the affiches prevailed.

Some writers used their letters to assert the importance of the expansion of rights. They directed their letters at specific policies debated in the Constituent Assembly. By 1791 especially, writers were more willing than ever before to take positions on the political agenda. They wrote opinion pieces calling for free expression and freedom from surveillance in the theater. Emphasizing the fraternity among all Frenchmen, an anonymous writer to the Affiches de Montpellier supported full rights of citizenship for Jews two weeks before the Constituent Assembly voted on civil rights for the Sephardim. M. Benjamin, a colonel in the National Guard in Dimont, wrote to the editors of the Journal de Paris a year later to call for active citizenship for all Jews in the weeks before the Assembly voted. The increase in letters that took a political position signaled that the information press was seen by its contributors as a space where their opinions would be heard. Letter writers wanted to participate in politics, and the editors made space in their pages for such participation.

It is noteworthy that writers turned to the affiches in order to discuss politics, because the information press was only one of the possible venues
where such debates could take place. By 1791 political factions and newspapers that reflected their positions had established themselves in Paris and in the provinces. The proliferation of newspapers printing on a daily schedule since 1789 had provided Parisian and provincial readers with more options for reading material that aligned with their political preferences. Nevertheless, many deputies and members of the public turned to the generally more moderate affiches to present their political opinions. The information press remained a trusted venue where information could be collected, debated, and shared.

**Rumor, Reputation, and the Information Press**

Writers continued to turn to the affiches as a reliable record keeper over 1790 and 1791, but the tenor of their letters to the editor began to change. A dramatic increase of pamphlets and brochures had accompanied the end of censorship in 1789, and such proliferation grew in the ensuing months and years. Many revolutionary publications were anonymous or pseudonymous in nature, which made it difficult for the reader to determine who had written what. Counterfeit versions of popular titles proliferated. Jacques Hébert’s *Le Père Duchesne*, which took to inserting the word “véritable” in its title, serves as one familiar example of the lack of regulation that allowed impersonators to flourish. In letters to the editors of the affiches, writers expressed their wish to “détromper le public”—to disabuse readers of rumor and to correct the record. In one such letter, the officers of the Enghien regiment wrote from Gap to the *Affiches du Dauphiné* to demand a correction that only the “honesty and impartiality” of the affiches could offer. In their letters, writers situated the affiches as a truthful record keeper, and they called on the editors to print their correspondence because they claimed it would benefit the public. For writers whose reputation was at stake, the information press was a longstanding channel to settle confusion and garner public attention.

Efforts to correct the record came from letter writers who declared and denied their affiliations with prominent clubs. Letters of affiliation declared membership to the Société des Amis des Noirs and the Jacobins. In Dijon the sculptor Daujon and the joiner Nefliez wrote to the affiches to note their surprise in seeing their names on the list of members of the Société des Amis de la Paix, which met at the home of the carpenter Tussat. They disavowed membership in the conservative club, saying they were not at present nor would they ever be members, and they asked the paper to print a letter to that effect. Labrosse, a *procureur*, Boquet, a *limonadier* and *épicier*, and the
Abbé Colas each wrote letters to the affiches the previous April and May to disavow membership in the same club. The departmental council banned Tussat’s club on December 29, 1790, less than a week before Daujon’s and Nefliez’s letter was published. Letters asserting affiliation and nonaffiliation rested on the widely shared premise that the information press was a source of reliable information. They made claims about the affiches as the storehouse of useful, truthful knowledge. The prevalence of correspondence aimed at correcting the record further underscored the ways that many contributors understood the role of the affiches.

In letters responding to rumor, the most frequent request was to print a denial of what the writer claimed were false attributions of authorship. Letter writers disavowed authorship of pamphlets, newspapers, and even letters to the editor. For example, the inspector Havas swore in his letter to the editor that he was in no way involved with the “direction, editing, profits or losses” of the Chronique de Normandie. Charles-François, marquis de Bonnay, denied being an editor of the royalist pamphlet Les Actes des Apôtres, which the police had recently visited. An anonymous writer disparaged the “new and dangerous fraud” by printers who used his pamphlet’s title to publish work that was not his, an act he described as “literary brigandage.” Similar letters to the editor had appeared before the Revolution, but they increased in frequency as the number of revolutionary newspapers in France burgeoned.

Other writers instead wrote to the affiches to claim a particular publication. For example, Joseph-Antoine Cerutti wrote to the Journal de Paris in what he claimed was his third attempt to get the editors’ attention. Someone was printing his manuscript about the criminal code without his permission. As he saw it, this was an act of “typographic brigandage” that amounted to calumny and theft, both of which, he argued, undermined the freedom of the press. Calumny was an attack that harmed one’s reputation, but it did not necessarily have to be false. Calumnious attacks on the personal honor of the deputies of the Constituent Assembly also intensified during these years. Unable to tolerate assaults on their honor, the deputies devised a series of crimes of speech and opinion. In calling the misattribution of authorship calumny, Cerutti called on the press to consider his personal honor. By describing false claims of authorship as calumnious attacks, writers argued that such attributions were direct and intentional affronts to their reputation.

Much of the recourse for calumny under the Old Regime, such as duels, lettres de cachet, and libel suits, were available only to social elites, but even they turned to the press to rebuff attacks on their honor. François Henri, comte de Virieu and deputy in the Constituent Assembly, wrote a letter
to disavow the “absurd calumnies” printed about him in the press, and he declared his love of liberty.\textsuperscript{81} Armand-Désiré de Vignerot du Plessis-Richelieu, duc d’Aiguillon and one of the leaders of the night of August 4, 1789, wrote to the \textit{Journal de Paris} to defend himself against direct and calumnious attacks and to declare his “attachment to the Constitution and my ardent zeal for the defense of the rights of the people,” which he said in no way weakened his profound respect for the king.\textsuperscript{82} In response to rumors he had heard, the deputy Claude-Emmanuel de Pastoret wrote to the \textit{Journal de Paris} in response to calumnious rumors about his patriotism in order to affirm his constant support for the sovereignty of the people and the Constitution.\textsuperscript{83} The deputy Michel Louis Etienne Regnaud wrote to the \textit{Journal de Paris} to respond to a rumor about whether he had been at the opera earlier in the month.\textsuperscript{84} Deputies wrote to the information press throughout 1790 and 1791 in order to counter reputational attacks.

Less prominent figures likewise responded to rumors they deemed harmful to their personal honor or the honor of their town. Abraham Locquet, an administrator for the Somme department and a justice of the peace for the Canton d’Hornoy, wrote to the affiches in Amiens to disavow the claims of “infamous calumniators” that he was coordinating those in his department to stop paying the champart. He declared his loyalty to the National Assembly and his intent to follow their decrees to the letter.\textsuperscript{85} A M. Soret wrote to the Affiches de l’Orléanois to counter claims made in the Feuille du Jour earlier that month that, in his opinion, disparaged the municipal elections in Orléans.\textsuperscript{86} In short, writers took it on themselves to settle attacks on their honor. They too situated the readers of the information press as judges in the disputes over their reputation.

Writers also took to the newspapers to reject calumnious claims and settle disputes when they had little other remedy. In Dijon, for example, two parties brought their complaint to the editor of the affiches. Beline, the captain in the Picardie regiment, wrote to combat what he saw as “injurious charges” that a man named Renaudin had spread against him. Beline claimed Renaudin’s son had asked to join the regiment while Beline was away from the home, so his wife had registered and paid the young man for his enlistment.\textsuperscript{87} Renaudin responded with a letter of his own, in which he argued that the captain had not followed proper procedure of inquiring with the young man’s parents before enlisting him. He stated that his own son was too young, and Beline knew it. Unable to find a resolution elsewhere, Renaudin brought his complaint to the paper, where he wrote, “I leave it to the public to weigh in the balance the fairness of Beline’s conduct and mine.”\textsuperscript{88}
Published disputes such as this one showed writers turned to the newspaper in order to convince others to listen and judge the evidence for themselves.

The increasing concern about personal honor in the revolutionary affiches was emblematic of the preoccupation with authority that writers had formulated in the Old Regime press. In the *Journal de Paris*, for example, writers increasingly rejected rumors that concerned them by writing to the paper. Before the Revolution, writers showed little interest in calumny, and in 1789 letters raising issues of personal honor made up 1.4 percent of the total letters published. Over the year 1790, the proportion reached 14.5 percent of all letters published and rose to 26.5 percent between January and September 1791. While similar letters had appeared in the prerevolutionary affiches, the proportion of letters concerned with reputation intensified during the Revolution, especially in 1791.

Over the spring and summer of 1791, the total number of letters to the editor published in the information press declined. The growing volume of calumnious attacks in the press and elsewhere heightened the stakes of participation in the pages of the affiches for letter writers and for those who published the newspapers. Editors rarely commented directly on the claims of calumny that they printed. In one exceptional case, Justine Giroud included an editorial note after a letter to the editor where the writer claimed a previous letter in her affiches was calumnious. For her part, she asserted the claims were not calumny at all but rather sarcasm. Nevertheless, she said that she would be more careful in the future to preserve the tone of moderation that characterized her paper. In most cases, however, editors simply published the letters from writers who wished to dispute calumny or rumor. From the vantage point of the letters to the editor, the culture of calumny was a revolutionary phenomenon that extended far beyond social elites to the broader writing public. Their correspondence underscored the urgency expressed by writers to educate newspaper readers and correct false claims.

For their part, deputies debated what freedom of the press ought to include throughout this period, and they expressed concerns about the threat that false claims posed to the public order. Article 11 of the Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen addressed the issue of public order and free speech directly. But personal honor and public opinion remained urgent issues for the deputies from 1789 to 1793. Writers expressed similar concerns in their letters to the editor, where they feared that false news would lead astray or divide the newspaper’s readers.

A de facto press freedom remained in place until August 1791. Yet even in this period of toleration between 1789 and 1791, newspapers that the
authorities believed would pose a threat to public order were suppressed. The *Gazette de Paris* and the *Journal général de la cour et de la ville*, two archconservative newspapers, were convicted of libel in civil cases in 1790. On the opposite end of the political spectrum, Marat’s press was impounded, and he was nearly arrested by the Châtelet in January 1790 for the inflammatory content he had printed in his *Ami du peuple*. In the first six months of 1790 alone, four libel suits were brought against Camille Desmoulins. Many suits over press freedom were brought before the Châtelet. When the Châtelet was replaced in the autumn of 1790 with a new revolutionary court system, prosecutions against the press ceased until 1791 after the massacre at the Champs de Mars on July 17 and the subsequent passage of the sedition law of July 18. \(^93\) Fearing that radical papers that wrote of resistance to the law presented a threat to the public order, the deputies enacted constitutional provisions on August 22 and 23, 1791, which permitted prosecution for published calumnious attacks against the probity or intentions of public officials. \(^94\) The Constituent Assembly passed the Constitution on September 3 and then disbanded at the end of September. The newly elected deputies of the Legislative Assembly took their seats. Though the laws curbing press freedom were not fully enforced, they seemed to have had a chilling effect on the editors and letter writers of the affiches. In August and September the information press stopped regularly printing letters. Perhaps the risk of prosecution was sufficient to suppress the letters to the editor, at least in the short term.

During the Revolution, the letters to the editor in Paris and in the provinces provided a locus for information sharing, critique, and debate through which readers voiced their opinions on agriculture, commerce, medicine, bienfaisance, the sciences, and the arts. As the system of censorship began to fall away in 1788 and 1789, writers brought to the affiches their opinions on politics and current events. The habits of mind that writers had cultivated in the forum of letters to the editor over the previous two decades equipped them to imagine change on a new level and to communicate it compellingly. The self-confidence that had bolstered Old Regime responses to reform as it related to scientific experimentation, social welfare, or agricultural innovation were now brought to bear on a more expansive scale. Once given the opportunity, writers voiced their political opinions boldly, bringing their practical approach to a range of social problems they now believed demanded their participation.

The affiches continued to provide room for debate through letters to the editor, at least until the autumn of 1791. In the early months of 1789, writers commented on the same wide range of subjects so typical of the Old Regime
information press, expressing a spirit of optimism about the human capacity to modify the sciences and society. They articulated the desire to figure out intellectual puzzles, and they shared a general commitment to implementing local changes. The writers also refashioned the information press as a responsive site for the discussion of politics. Deputies in the Constituent Assembly wrote to those who had elected them via the affiches. Writers who wanted to know just how policies in the Assembly would impinge on their own lives wrote letters to the editor. Their correspondence vividly conveyed the political education of the writing public.

The spike in letters concerning personal reputation in 1791 showed how much communication had changed in the early years of the Revolution. In the wake of the summer of 1791, with the king’s flight to Varennes and the massacre at the Champs de Mars, political uncertainty and the prevalence of calumnious attacks in the press took on a new significance for readers. The personal stakes of participation in the press had risen, both for editors and for those who wrote letters to them. The vibrant forum of letters to the editor that had shaped the affiches for more than two decades dwindled in the late summer and early autumn of 1791.

Moreover, press freedom had increased the number of newspapers that readers could choose from over the early years of the Revolution, and the affiches faced direct competition for the first time in their history. Many revolutionary newspapers printed letters from their readers as the affiches did. After 1791 the editors of some of the newspapers, such as the Journal de Paris and the Affiches de Toulouse, would renew the printing of letters from their readers. The Journal de Provence’s founding editor, Ferréol Beaugeard, welcomed the Revolution and adapted his paper to make room for political news, but the number of letters declined in 1791; only three letters appeared in the paper that summer. Other newspapers, such as the Affiches de l’Orléanois and the Affiches d’Angers, abandoned the publication of letters to the editor. Some newspapers ceased to publish altogether, such as the Affiches de Montpellier, which ended its run in 1791.

The style of conversations fostered in the information press likely found new revolutionary venues. A proliferation of social organizations provided spaces for debate and facilitated more efficient responses from those in authority than the newspapers ever had. In Paris the neighborhood districts and, after the spring of 1790, section meetings, organized ostensibly for the election of local and national representatives, continued to meet spontaneously and provide for local administrative needs. Political cafés became vibrant spaces where information was read, announced, and debated. And there was a great proliferation of popular clubs, which began as gatherings
for deputies to the National Assembly to discuss policy but grew into net-
works that spread throughout the provinces and the Atlantic world to unite
partisans around a shared ideological position and policy agenda. In just
three years, 1,500 clubs had formed throughout France; by 1791 every depart-
ment had at least one. Clubs also served to connect the provincial town to a
national community. The forum of letters to the editor had provided space
for debate and motivated projects for social change and scientific inquiry.
Clubs, sections, and cafés moved into the discursive space the information
press had occupied, providing a new means of sociability and facilitating
accountability from both the local administration and the national govern-
ment. The habits of mind that writers had forged in the affiches were applied
in new sites to implement practical, social, and political changes.