Conclusion

In 1777 a dentist named Catalan who worked in Paris on the rue Dauphine summed up the goals of the information press as he saw them: “To encourage emulation, to do justice to merit, to instruct the Public about discoveries useful to humanity, this is the law that you, yourselves, have imposed.” For many readers, the information press served as a venue for instruction, as a space for debate framed by a responsive readership, and as a source of inspiration that readers could emulate. As writers often put it, “all that was useful to humanity” fit within the purview of the paper.

Catalan captured the aims that editors themselves had set for the information press. Between 1770 and 1788, editors launched affiches in towns and cities throughout France, and in the prospectuses announcing the appearance of their newspapers, they frequently requested correspondence from their subscribers. Licensing, censorship, postal systems, and the interests of the editors themselves shaped the content that appeared on the newspaper page. Nevertheless, the public engagement with the affiches was extensive; readers accessed the newspaper by subscriptions delivered via the post and through social spaces such as reading rooms, booksellers’ shops, and cafés. By inviting and publishing letters from their readers, editors fostered an epistolary reciprocity that played a major role in defining the general information newspapers.
Thousands of participants, representing a wide and diverse readership, wrote to the affiches in the two decades before the Revolution. Some of the writers in question were published authors, or were already or would soon become public officials. But in a great many cases, their only foray into print was their letter to the editor. The relatively low cost of writing a letter to one’s local paper permitted writers, men and women who lacked the resources or social networks to publish a book or pamphlet, to see their ideas in print. And for the historian, listening to such voices offers a substantially new perspective on how the Enlightenment and the Revolution were experienced.

The affiches invited men and women from a spectrum of social positions into conversations with one another. By comparison with the men and women of the age who authored books or who participated in salons or academies, those who addressed letters to the editor constituted an expansive range of writers. Moreover, by publishing anonymous and pseudonymous letters in addition to signed ones, the editors opened up their papers to an even wider array of participants. For thousands of letter writers in Paris and the provinces, the affiches afforded them a new venue to share their opinions.

There is ample evidence, moreover, that letter writers learned from one another. The processes of citation and attribution in the affiches extended to books, newspapers, and other letter writers. Writers referenced periodicals as often as they did books. Rather than returning to the same titles repeatedly, they mentioned a capacious body of texts that pointed the readers toward a wider world of print beyond the newspaper page. References to books, periodicals, and other letters functioned as signposts, and they shaped the way that readers interpreted the information press. The letter writers also commented from time to time on the experience of reading itself—where, and how, and for what purposes they had confronted specific texts. Through such activity, they situated the forum of letters as a virtual space for reading together.

The discussions of popular science, agronomy, and bienfaisance in the press vividly conveyed how writers interacted with the information press, in such a way—as Catalan had described it—as to inspire emulation, recognize merit, and share useful and humane knowledge. Taken together, such letters reveal that writers responded to both the spectacular and the material, to suggestions of both dramatically new innovations and of relatively minor adjustments to the manner in which men and women interacted with their world. While popular attitudes toward knowledge ranged from the dramatic to the banal, what united them was a preoccupation with the utility of
innovation. Hot-air balloons, electricity, medicinal remedies, and new fodder crops were all celebrated by letter writers because they were, above all, useful.

The published correspondence underscored the general fascination with the intellectual and cultural questions of the day. In letters to the editor the circulation of knowledge took on new, participatory forms. Experts used the affiches to foster public interest in new scientific questions. It was around some of the most visually arresting experiments that the conversation converged. The uncertainty about precisely how ballooning or electricity worked prompted more correspondence from savants who ran precise, well-documented experiments. But the writing public was not satisfied just to observe and read along; they wanted to take part and debate. In their responses, contestation was a defining feature of the press.

Writers concerned with farming in particular attempted to address a wider audience that spanned social distinctions. In their effort to increase knowledge about new agricultural products and techniques, they relied on information that they themselves had tested. In so doing, they formulated new claims to authority that opened up debates over land management, new crops, and crop diseases. Agriculture concerned writers and readers throughout the kingdom, and the information press was a space in which all could share useful knowledge, instruct the reader, and encourage emulation.

In their discussions of bienfaisance the letter writers advocated change based on a common sense of feeling. The frequent references to the “sensitive souls” among the prospective readers underscored their reliance on the empathy of the reader to motivate action. The changes they suggested were usually material and local, but the cumulative effect of such mundane proposals had the potential, nevertheless, to change people’s lives. The correspondence about bienfaisance in the affiches fostered a questioning of the way things existed at present and afforded a space to act on that questioning, even—and perhaps particularly—on relatively minor issues. Writing a letter on bienfaisance afforded writers on the margins a means of claiming the authority to speak in the paper.

From the vantage point of the letters published in the affiches, the concept of Enlightenment was not a fixed doctrine or ideology but rather a psychology and an epistemology about the capacity of people like themselves to change the conditions of daily life, even if only in small steps. The optimism conveyed in letters concerning a new discovery stimulated public imagination, generating ideas that would put new knowledge to use. Some ideas were practical ones, suitable for immediate implementation. Others were suggestions that inadvertently delineated the limits of the writer’s
understanding of underlying scientific or social processes. But the majority of the suggestions for improvement shared in their pages entailed local and attainable efforts aimed at the amelioration of the material circumstances of people’s day-to-day lives.

The letters to the editor of the late Old Regime continued to appear into the period of the French Revolution. The capacious nature of the affiches, as well as the wide range of participants and of opinions expressed, still endured after 1789, even as political debates, with the collapse of state censorship, came also to be included. Indeed, many of the conversations about agricultural reform, bienfaisance, the sciences, and the arts persisted at least until 1791. Such continuities suggest that political participation in the affiches was only a new manifestation of the larger debates that had come to define the information press, as newspapers focused on the amelioration of daily life and the questioning of established norms in an incremental, small-scale fashion.

The cultural and intellectual changes of the late Old Regime did not in themselves cause the Revolution, but the practices of reading, comparing, and critiquing that guided the letters to the editor prepared writers to act once the Revolution had begun. Through the pages of the affiches, writers had formulated new habits of mind, which they adapted to new political purposes after 1789. The information press changed too, responding to a new media market and press freedom. Through their letters, men and women, most of whom would never hold political office, could now share their political opinions as they had once shared ideas on the sciences, agriculture, and bienfaisance.

Penning a letter to the editor could also move a writer to consider his or her place within society in new ways. Participation via the letters to the editor was exciting for writers, who recorded in their diaries or private letters the thrill of seeing their letter in print. For approximately half of the writers, the inclusion of one’s actual name and profession served as the basis of self-presentation. The other half of the writers adopted different modes of self-assertion, by submitting an unsigned letter, writing under a pen name, indicating only their initials, or describing themselves simply as “a subscriber.” The editors of the affiches made room for all such contributions by publishing signed and unsigned letters alike. In doing so, the letters became a creative field for the experimentation with public personae and the consideration of one’s subjectivity.

The dialogical character of the papers stimulated new forms of correspondence. Correspondence in the affiches drew on the epistolary norms of
reciprocity in letters exchanged between individuals, where the reception of a letter invited a response from the recipient. Writers might openly appeal for feedback from the editors and from fellow readers, asking them to judge for themselves the merits of the letter. Editors often actively called for letters to the editor on particular subject matter to include in their pages. Their notes du rédacteur at the end of letters offered comments, corrections, or suggestions for further reading. And they arranged the pages themselves to invite conversation. They might also cut and paste into their own newspapers interesting letters garnered from other affiches. Such processes of cutting and pasting, and of replying and contesting, generated a dense web of exchange.

More than merely the solitary musings of individuals, the letters to the editor constituted a form of social media—an ongoing discussion between readers and newspaper editors, and among readers themselves. Taken together, the letters formed a complex and multitudinous conversation between interlocutors who would not otherwise have interacted with one another. Even the readers who did not write letters to the editor could see people like themselves participating in the paper. In bringing a more capacious group of voices to the fore, the affiches had the potential to transform people’s reflections and perceptions about the world in which they lived, to modify, as it were, the very nature of the conversation.

Potential contributors to the information press relied on a variety of arguments to justify the publication of their letters. The merits and clarity of their ideas no doubt mattered, but the cases they made to the editor to publish their letters were likewise significant. Some writers referenced their qualifications or expertise as the basis for publication, but credentials were not a prerequisite for publication. For many, the case they made relied on empirical or emotional grounds. Writers explained that they had seen an event happen and were thus particularly equipped to explain it. Others wrote to the paper to share the results of an experiment that had produced interesting results, even if they could not explain why it did so. Writers also styled their letters to the editor in affective terms by emphasizing the empathy that had prompted their action. In all cases, the writers wanted to participate in the conversation. In their efforts to garner the attention of the affiches’ editors and readers, they developed repertoires for claiming the authority to speak.

At the same time, writers found assessing all of the opinions by known and unknown correspondents disconcerting. They weighed the truth of letters that appeared in the paper, and they wrote in to correct the record when they encountered information they deemed false or confusing. Evaluating the credibility of the claims they found in the paper presented challenges to the writing public. The affiches allowed for compelling stories to spread, at
times, before they were substantiated. It was the very lack of consensus that animated the contestation in the letters over scientific and social questions. For writers, determining whether one could trust what a letter writer whom one had never met had to say grew even more complex with the coming of the French Revolution, when hundreds of journalists began publishing papers of their own. In their efforts to deal with such uncertainty, writers learned how to participate in an eighteenth-century sphere of sociability. Letter writers represented themselves as useful and civic-minded. Through the affiches, they devised ways of communicating with strangers.

Interest in social relations would only grow in the wake of the Revolution. With the advent of statistics and the social sciences, society itself would become an object that one could visualize and comprehend. Letters to the editor published in the affiches were one early venue in which readers began to glimpse society, and through the act of writing their own letters, men and women imagined themselves as participants in a social body. The forum of letters to the editor opened up a social and critical space that readers accessed from their writing desks and dressing tables, their cafés and living rooms. In writing back to the paper, they fashioned a public with one another.