

Responding to Print in Ages of "Information Overload"

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The eighteenth century was a veritable information age, when the overall publication of books, pamphlets, and newspapers skyrocketed, and the range of content diversified dramatically. The tremendous growth in access to print on myriad subjects has been well studied, but how readers interpreted such an information influx remains an open question for historians. My work explores the way that print was consumed and interpreted by a wide cross-section of French literate society through a study of letters to the editor published in Parisian and provincial newspapers between 1770 and 1791.

My current book project takes the subject of letters to the editor as its subject in order to study how readers responded to the information they read and discussed. The book manuscript makes three major interventions. First, it considers the forum of letters to the editor as perhaps the single most expansive and diverse sphere of Enlightenment sociability. Second, it employs digital history techniques to show that information was exchanged and critiqued amongst newspapers, underscoring the formation of public opinion as a contested and contingent process. Third, it articulates a reevaluation of the Enlightenment, not as a canon of thought promulgated by a few philosophes, but instead as a collaborative process above all concerned with finding solutions to the difficulties of daily life.

In response to the Bloomington Workshop's theme, "Numbers, Measure, Scale," I propose a discussion of a draft chapter from my book manuscript. The draft chapter tracks the reception and circulation of books through the forum of letters to the editor. The sources for this paper include a number of Parisian and provincial papers that were published in the 1770s and 1780s, including the first Parisian daily, *le Journal de Paris*, and a range of provincial newspapers called *affiches*, including those published in Toulouse, Poitiers, Metz, and Grenoble—newspapers to which readers frequently penned their critiques of works of fiction, poetry, theatre and other forms of print matter.

The chapter first traces the popular print matter that circulated via a network of Parisian and provincial newspapers by counting and categorizing the publications, themselves. The publications are organized according to the catalogue system used by booksellers in the eighteenth century. Initial results indicate that the topics that interested the French reading public were widespread. Indeed, the range of works cited in the letters to the editor reflected anxieties of "information overload" and efforts to organize human knowledge, an endeavor most famously undertaken by the editors of *l'Encyclopédie* but nevertheless a widespread impulse in the late eighteenth century.

Then, the chapter presents a network analysis of the publications cited. By tracing which publications and which writers cited particular texts, this visualization allows us to ask what kinds of books and ideas circulated in the public sphere. Linking the provincial and Parisian press, this analysis presents exciting possibilities for understanding how reading publics took shape, and for evaluating the extent to which reading circles in the provinces and the capital were connected.

Finally, through close readings of the letters, themselves, this chapter explores the rhetorical structure of the letters and their thematic content to address the ways that men and women in eighteenth century France wrote about the process of reading. While their letters were largely concerned with making an argument, or presenting their case on a particular subject, their letters also lend insight into the processes of reading in the late eighteenth century. Through their discussions of their daily reading habits, their intensive or extensive reading practices, their collective and solitary reading, and their responses of sensibility and rationality, letter writers provide a window into the many ways in which men and women in the eighteenth century made sense of print.

The proposed paper is a contribution to an extensive historiography in eighteenth-century French history about what and how people read on the eve of Revolution. It is also a self-conscious effort to read my sources with a variety of scales of analysis and sets of relationships in mind. In so doing, it embraces the guiding questions of the Bloomington Workshop: to think large and small, to adopt a range of measurements in order to make sense of the information at hand, and to consider the ways in which eighteenth-century readers responded to similar questions.