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The ideas of the Enlightenment and belligerent royal officials critically influenced the French Revolution, but how did an entire generation learn about such ideas prior to the Revolution? Jack R.Censer's achievement in this volume is to marshal a vast literature in order to provide a coherent and original interpretation of the role of the French Press in the dissemination of social and political ideas in the years leading up to the Revolution. Censer also explores the relationship between journalists and government officials and unearths a range of sophisticated censorship techniques employed by the government to keep Bad News off the front pages.

In a field dominated by specialized studies but few generalizations, *The French Press in the Age of Enlightenment* provides a bold synthesis regarding the periodical press from mid-century to the Revolution.

Jack R.Censer is Professor of History at George Mason University. His most recent publications include *The French Revolution and Intellectual History* (1989), and he is series editor of *Rewriting Histories*.

Jack R.Censer



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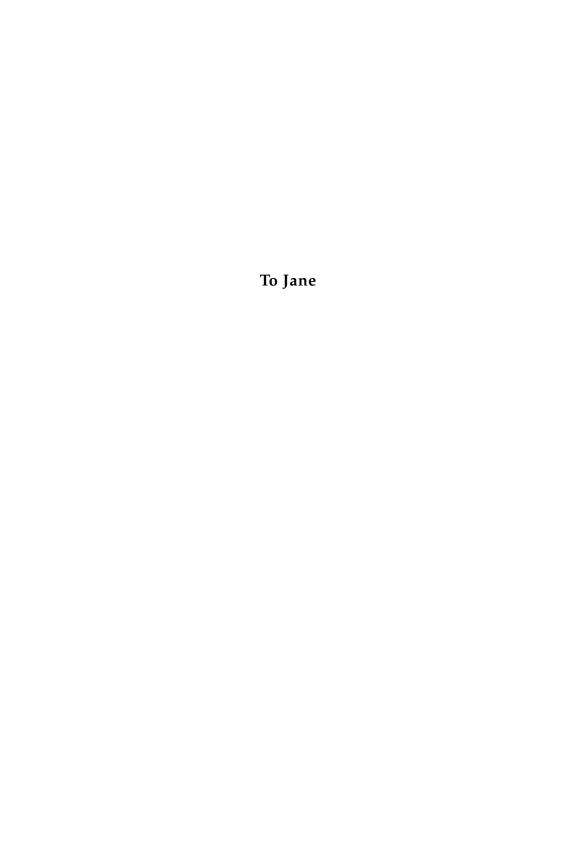
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By the second half of the eighteenth century, the French language periodical press had become a very substantial enterprise with dozens of competing publications. Various characteristics distinguished it from the larger world of print: above all, the government recognized its different characteristics and accorded it its own regimen of regulation. The press's periodicity also provided a particular sort of challenge to state authority. Critics, indeed, considered periodicals a single group, often assailing it—rather contradictorily—for useless polemics as well as for dryness. Forced to develop a different work schedule for the periodical, printers came to recognize the medium as especially problematic. Editors too came to regard periodicals as a genre, remaining in journalism even if they seldom idealized such a career. Some publishers specialized in the periodical, and norms governing proper reporting began, hesitantly, to be articulated.

A common-sense definition of "a periodical," that would capture contemporary opinion on this subject, might specify it as a printed publication available on announced dates, at least once a trimester, designed to serve a broad, at least regional, reading public.⁵ In addition, these organs must have published something that their audience would have seen as current news; whatever the subject, contributing to the present remained critical. Otherwise, they were simply volumes in a series. "French periodicals" include, for this study, the considerable Francophone press, published beyond the nation's borders but intended to a substantial degree for a French audience.

Such a definition excludes, in particular, specialized magazines intended for particular interests, professions or organizations, such as periodicals that were exclusively composed of price lists, ship arrivals and departures, or technical, scientific or artistic materials, as well as manuscript newsletters whose price and small number of copies allowed only limited circulation. Excluding such newsletters may seem arbitrary, but this genre possessed an entirely different milieu and purpose than its

printed relatives.⁶ In general, the manuscript newssheet was far moreelitist and far more focused on clandestine information. Other relatives of the press excluded from this study include annual almanacs and pamphlets whose subjects competed with periodicals but whose infrequent periodicity, among other characteristics, made them rather different creations.

To delineate what this book or this extended essay—as a general survey of the French periodical from 1745 to the revolutionary crisis early in 17877—can contribute to our knowledge of the press requires some review of the literature. The historiography of the press already consists, not only of countless monographic investigations, but also of a number of general histories. Perhaps the greatest synthesis, that by Eugène Hatin in the midnineteenth century, set the pattern for all the other overall accounts by providing individual treatments of many journals. In effect, his and other general histories consisted of serial biographies of periodicals. For many publications, they fulfilled this goal very well, although gaps in information about some papers made their findings uneven. Of course, such biographies could hardly be melded into an overall picture of the press for the late Old Regime. But such studies comprised the best and the bulk of the work up through the last general history edited by Claude Bellanger and others in 1969.

In large part originating in France under the leadership of Pierre Rétat, Jean Sgard and Claude Labrosse, more studies have likely been published since 1969 than in that long period from 1789 to 1969. Broader waves of scholarship have also been responsible for this surge. Among the many influences was a shift in the historiography of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. As social history propelled researchers to examine the ideas of those outside the intellectual elite, historians turned to the press to see how journalists presented politics and culture to a wider public. Scholars interested in literature simultaneously invaded the history of the press as their interest in different types of genres mounted. More recently, as historians became concerned with discourses, the press appeared a good place to explore the general resonance of particular sets of ideas. Scholars have taken soundings of eighteenth-century feminism and misogyny in the pages of the press.¹⁰

The more recent studies differ significantly from their forerunners. This new research has greatly deepened our knowledge. First, scholars have seriously investigated the content of journals. While Hatin relied largely on journalists' published promises for content, we now have content analyses. Second, historians of the press have charted new areas in the milieus that produced and regulated the press. Important investigations have taken place about such topics as the role of the government, business practices, expectations of readers, the backgrounds of journalists, and availability of information. Finally, some scholars trained in the study of

literature have addressed the press, not so much as a carrier of ideas, but as a system of communication. How were ideas transported through the press compared with other media?¹¹ Furthermore, many of these new analyses have attained a level of detail and nuance previously unmatched. Expanding onto virgin turf, such research has mapped the press with unprecedented sophistication.

But what new and old share is a great fragmentation in understanding. While previous works reported the field without much effort at synthesis, recent studies seem to excavate an increasingly deeper trench with little reference to one another. Even the best work seldom tends to utilize the findings of nearby scholarship.

In this study, I hope first and foremost to create a general interpretation and reverse the growing incoherence of the field by providing overall treatments of selected areas. By outlining the general contours of the press and its contents, this book supersedes several past general histories composed of juxtaposed press biographies. Yet the complexities of these new areas of investigation have also made summary difficult; in their own ways they provide pictures as partial as those of Hatin and others. Overall, I plan to use and supplement not only all earlier work, but to direct it toward a synthesis.

Producing a general interpretation while retaining the subjects and techniques of generations of scholars, especially the most recent, requires significant compromises. First, the treatment of many topics had to be limited. Generalized coverage of a myriad of areas—some of which require very painstaking approaches—is beyond the competence of a single scholar, and perhaps even a team. Yet even for the subjects selected, other choices and strategies had to be made. No general account could meet the current high standards regarding the necessary level of detail and nuance. Yet simply to report various evidence about periodicals would end up like Hatin and his successors. To circumvent this problem, this essay relies on two approaches. Most chapters employ a few carefully chosen case studies to take advantage of the detailed research of others. For other questions, it has been possible to explore evidence concerning many periodicals and extrapolate the conclusions. Essentially, to reach a sophisticated level of general understanding, this book relies on generalizing from limited information. Even though this technique can partly overcome past problems—and, I hope, sustain the high level of recent scholarship found in monographs—it demands the reader's indulgence for adventurous extensions from details to generalizations. Such an approach holds yet another seeming drawback since its reliance on specific cases may omit some of the best known journals and journalists. Fortunately, the older general histories as well as the newly published Dictionnaire des journaux (Paris, 1991), provide much information on these well known cases.

With such compromises, this admittedly limited synthetic picture can reduce the fragmentation already described. By providing a bird's-eye view, this book should provide a focus, or at least a target, for future research. In any case, this extended essay—for that is what it is—by establishing a general interpretation can build the framework to allow concentrated studies of journals and thus can facilitate more rapid advances in this important subfield. Despite the considerable achievements of the work of Hatin and others, the history of the press has been little integrated into the general interpretation of the Old Regime and the coming of the Revolution. In part, this from a lack of generalizations about the press—a gap this study attempts to fill. At the same time this process ought to encourage further the incorporation of the periodical into general interpretations of eighteenth-century France.

Twin goals—drawing the first overall picture of the press and relating it to broader historiography—provide the impetus for this study. What then are the areas selected for synthesis? The first half of the book addresses the point of view expressed in three main genres: the political press, the advertisers, and the literary/philosophical press. The remainder of the work concerns the milieu. While many subjects might have been selected, the justification for the choice here of the journalistic community, the role of the central government, and the audience is that these three factors seem the most significant in understanding the press's perspective. Moreover, historians have addressed all three (as well as content) on their own merit.

Informing the selection of the particular areas of concentration were broader historical contentions beyond the history of the press. Central to motivating this work is the interest, already noted among many scholars of the press, in the ideas debated and available in the eighteenth century. This concern not only led here to focusing on content, but also to exploring the implications of the findings. More precisely, whenever scholars have weighed the political opinions circulating in eighteenth-century France, they have employed a crude continuum ranging from the values of absolutism at one end to those of the Revolution at the other. This approach is problematic because over the century the king became less and less an absolutist himself. Nonetheless, the monarchy, even if not the monarch, still rested on the foundation of divine right; and it remains reasonable to take this as one end of the spectrum.

Specifically, this overview contributes to mapping the range of political ideas by showing a mixed picture of how periodicals understood the monarchy. The first half of Chapter 1 on the newspaper reveals that the coverage of events arrived late and appeared rather indistinct, depriving these periodicals of an opportunity to inject much of a system of timely accountability into politics. As the century came to its climactic end, this situation ameliorated but without substantive change. The remainder of

the chapter indicates that, with regard to the more open expression of attitudes, newspapers could contribute though perhaps in rather unexpected ways. Direct criticism of the crown emerged in the press of the 1750s and 1760s, but this critique largely withered in the later decades until the series of crises leading directly into the Revolution were underway. And there was praise for the government's foreign policy. Although an ideological challenge indirectly emerged in the 1770s and 1780s through newspaper coverage of the democratic revolutions, this material could not compensate for the decline in direct criticism. No individual publication broke out of this pattern. While some historians have found the political press merely an organ of the monarchy, 13 others (and I too in an earlier work) have portrayed the press as becoming increasingly bold.14 Some scholars have even seen the Revolution developing in the pages of the Old Regime papers. This chapter reaches a more nuanced and diachronic assessment than the extremes, as it shows both the extent and the transformation of the press's criticisms.

In contributing to understanding the problematic nature of the press, Chapter 2 on the provincial papers and Chapter 3 on the literary and philosophical press provide the same kind of balanced treatment. Although generally viewed as the least challenging, the provincial press in my account validates a vision of society that questioned traditional arrangements. Still, its somewhat oblique criticisms of society would only indirectly trouble the crown. These affiches thus created some but not extensive difficulties for the monarchy. The literary-philosophical press, discussed in Chapter 3, screened out the majority of the most radical ideas and eschewed direct involvement with the Encyclopédistes and other intellectuals. Yet these periodicals still broadly supported sentimentalism à la Rousseau and Diderot and the High Enlightenment minus its attacks on Church and state. 15 These two intellectual movements were not particularly controversial after mid-century; yet contemporaries believed them to be the antithesis of Old Regime religion, and to a lesser extent, the Old Regime government. Nonetheless, the monarchy endeavored to sidestep even this. As Daniel Roche has shown, the crown tried hard to associate itself with this part of the intellectual outpouring of the century. 16 Although monarchial supporters such as Voltaire considered this effort successful, most people disagreed. Thus, the press's support for sentimentalism and a muted High Enlightenment provided something of an attack against monarchy.

In sum, the first three chapters give a similar portrayal of the periodical and dispute those scholars who claim too little and those who claim too much for the press. This work also adds to the broader debate on the availability of different notions. It reminds us, contrary to common scholarly perception, that the eighteenth century was not simply the crossroads for a maelstrom of unsettling political beliefs. Of course, the

press was not totally quiescent politically and was more charged regarding Church and traditional society. Finally, while this study evidently also rejects the direct causal link between an aggressive press and the Revolution, still the press can tell us much about the causes of the Revolution. The conclusion explores this topic and relates it to the historiography of Old Regime and the Revolution.

The second part of this book focuses on the concerns of press history by explaining the contours of the periodicals' context; yet it too contributes to a range of issues of more general concern. Chapter 4 on the journalists adds depth to our understanding of recruitment into the middle ranges of intellectual life. Although historians have tried to comprehend governmental efforts to regulate the printed word, they have never produced a detailed chronological account concerning any medium, much less the periodical. Chapter 5 accomplishes that task and in so doing can cast much light on other literary forms as well as on periodicals. For example, patterns of governmental activity and laxity may explain the rhythm of court cases explored by Sarah Maza.¹⁷ This chapter also provides insights applicable to efforts to reform copyright laws. More important, the limits and strengths of royal authority become evident. Finally, Chapter 6 contributes to the history of reading. Little is known in this area, so every accretion possesses value. This one adds greatly to the hypothesis advanced by Robert Darnton that associates the Old Regime with "intensive" instead of "extensive reading". 18 While not quite paralleling Darnton's, the categories of Chapter 6 argue that the papers expected a critical reader. Such a reader gives force to Darnton's conjecture.

Any investigation of the sort intended here necessitates some preliminary outline of the numbers, growth, and divisions in the press. One way of approaching this subject is to categorize and count published periodicals. Of course, this method indicates nothing about circulation but provides general dimensions over time. Sorting through over one thousand Francophone titles that appeared from 1745 to the Revolution poses still other problems. Simply counting these titles proves problematic because it places the most important and ephemeral publications on an equal footing, vastly overvaluing the latter and potentially overrepresenting their significance. In order to provide some general idea of the size of the press, this book attempts a compromise approach by counting for its purposes those journals—evidently only those published for France, even if they served other countries—that lasted at least three years. 19 Focusing on such periodicals presumes that reasonably successful periodicals that acquired some following are considered. By relying on relatively stable periodicals, this strategy can identify and categorize the journals' primary subject matter. Of course, this criterion still under-values the most

successful periodicals, excluding even a handful of extremely popular literary journals that lasted less than three years.²⁰ Other difficulties plagued the process of counting, but their effects likely proved negligible.²¹

Such considerations, however, sound an alert that any figures must only be considered suggestive. Yet even when one uses different parameters to define the press, the results tend strongly in the same direction, encouraging a belief in the reliability of the means employed here. First, as all commentators have pointed out, the press experienced substantial, reasonably steady growth throughout the century (shown in Table Intro-1).²²

Table Intro-1 Numbers of periodicals available to the reading public in France

Date	Number
1745	15
1750	21
1755	25
1760	37
1765	37
1770	50
1775	68
1780	73
1785	82

N.B. This table and the others of this section report on the periodicals that lasted three or more years.

Although any given periodical covered many subjects, it seems reasonable to break down these publications into three major categories: political, literary-philosophical and affiches. The first category with its emphasis on formal politics appears clear, but the others demand clarification. A large number of periodicals ranged over the intellectual world and discussed a panoply of questions from science to literature. Readers of the eighteenth century saw no clear demarcations. People jumbled issues together as did these publications. From these practices emerges a large catch-all classification of literary-philosophical periodicals. The affiches, which began only after the mid-eighteenth century, were a special genre that concentrated on advertising. Generally published in the provinces, they had specific regional bases and also carried news of that area. Exceptions to this pattern were the two published in Paris. The first, the Affiches de province, was the forerunner of all the local sheets and was clearly intended for national distribution. The other, the Petites Affiches, covered the Paris basin, but because of the economic supremacy of the metropolis likely also found readers all over the country. In it, some advertisements surely aimed at a nation of purchasers.

Many of these periodicals trespassed beyond their field, but most remained primarily in one or another area. In order to count the different genres, (as in the following tables of this section), I sorted combination journals according to the kind of news on which primarily they concentrated. This practice distorted the number of different kinds to a very limited extent. In a later section of this chapter which considers circulation figures for each genre, these assignments could have had significance, at least for particular genres if not for any overall total. Important exceptions are discussed at appropriate times.

Although the press grew throughout the last half-century of the Old Regime, Table Intro-2 indicates that the increase was unevenly distributed across the various categories.

Years	Politics	Literary–Philosophical	Affiches
1745	5	9	1
1750	5	14	2
1755	5	16	3
1760	12	19	6
1765	12	17	8
1 <i>77</i> 0	12	22	16
1775	13	31	24
1780	18	28	27
1785	19	39	34

Table Intro-2 Total of papers appearing in given years

Masked behind the steady increase of the century were some major variations. Numbers in the category of politics jumped sharply after 1755 and again in the last decade of the Old Regime. The affiches came to exist in this latter period and account for a substantial part of all the growth of the decades preceding the Revolution. If one breaks these numbers down by the locations of the periodicals, other patterns emerge (see Table Intro-3).

Table Intro-3			

	Politica	Political papers		hilosophical
Years	France	Foreign	France	Foreign
1745	1	4	5	4
1750	1	4	6	8
1 7 55	1	4	11	5
1760	1	9	16	3
1765	1	9	13	4
1770	1	11	16	6
1 <i>77</i> 5	3	10	23	8
1780	3	15	19	9
1785	3	16	23	6

One major point illustrated by this table is that most philosophical papers were published inside France. Consequently, an explanation for what was occurring within France could go far toward explaining the rise and stagnation of the literary press in general. When Malesherbes assumed office as head of the censorship in 1751, he encouraged, as Chapter 5 discusses more fully below, the system for allowing French literary and philosophical journals to publish, and many seem to have taken advantage of the opportunity.²³ The surge of extraterritorial journals by 1750 might explain Malesherbes's move. Perhaps it was a saturation of the market or perhaps a weariness with the battles between the philosophes and their detractors that led to weakened growth after 1760. After another leap after 1770, the subsequent stagnation clearly stemmed from the efforts of the press tsar Charles-Joseph Panckoucke to absorb as many competitors as possible.²⁴

While the Parisian scene illuminates trends in philosophical journals, the extraterritorial press does the same for political newspapers. The first problem is to explain an initial lack of growth, followed by their surge in the 1760s. Until the late 1750s the government allowed entry to only five foreign periodicals, and one attracted so few subscribers (the Avant-Coureur of Frankfurt with less than 10) that it was not counted here. But after 1759, a new policy emerged that tolerated the entrance of gazettes from outside the borders.²⁵ Another increase occurred in the late 1770s, when the political press grew in France while remaining stable abroad. In this case, demand rose because of the American revolutionary war and seems to have been met in part by a relaxed policy that allowed Panckoucke to produce officially foreign but actually domestic political journals.²⁶ Finally once it became possible to license local affiches, an ever rising number of publishers availed themselves of the possibility. Whatever the ebb and flow, clearly a substantial number of publications spread across Old Regime France.

While counting and sorting the periodicals produces at least a sense of the opportunities for eighteenth-century readers, the size and power of this press become more apparent with the addition of circulation figures (see Appendix I for the circulation statistics used here that lack specific citation). Such data possess the inevitable limit of juxtaposing numbers for dailies, bi-weeklies, weeklies, and other periodicities. Even more speculative are the reflections on the size of the audience that conclude each section.

While new affiches rapidly appeared as the century drew to a dose, their circulation always remained small, with a maximum of no more than a few hundred. Still there were many titles available, two dozen by 1775 and almost three dozen a decade later. These myriad journals must have produced several thousand issues weekly. The popular *Journal de Paris*, a hybrid of sorts, was, indeed, somewhat an affiches, though not

predominantly so. Had it been included here, obviously the circulation of this category would have soared. The practice of sharing copies, including those available in reading rooms, also expanded readership. In some cases, as the name "affiches" suggests, these papers must have been posted for general and unrestricted inspection.

The number of titles in the literary-philosophical press climbed more slowly than the affiches, but still expanded from about ten to nearly forty durable efforts. And while their circulation could be as small as the affiches, they could range above two thousand. The Journal de Paris provided an important addition, perhaps because of its livelier, less ponderous approach and its daily publication schedule.²⁷ The *Journal de* Paris meant the growth in total circulation of this genre likely exceeded the general growth in titles. Perhaps at mid-century there were a few thousand while toward the end the numbers climbed into the low tens of thousands. Nuancing this projection was the uncertain fate of the foreign press (see note 21 for more discussion) with its disproportionately high representation in the early period. At the least, home consumption was substantial for these foreign journals. Moreover, the periodicals based in France were far more likely to be exported than other varieties. All these considerations surely lowered French distribution, particularly early in the 1740s. But this evaluation proceeds without reference to more ephemeral publications, lasting less than three years, whose presence in this genre was particularly substantial. Their addition, one might hypothesize, might raise overall numbers of issues and show a somewhat altered pattern of evolution. Possibly also adding to this circulation might have been the Mercure de France, which after 1778 came to focus on politics and so for 1780 and 1785 is counted among that genre. The Mercure actually belongs there because the great bulk of its subscriptions did not arrive until the addition of a political section.²⁸ But whatever the actual numbers in circulation, sharing greatly amplified readership. Because of the relatively high cost of the literary-philosophical press and the fact that its news was less perishable, its potential for being read and reread was quite high.

The political press grew in titles at about the same rate as the philosophical press and its increase in circulation is far more certain. Work by Gilles Feyel allows us to ascertain precisely the early distribution in France of the foreign produced gazettes (see Table Intro-4). In the 1740s this number at most just topped 3,500. At the same time, the *Gazette de France*, the lone domestic journal, had a maximum of 8,800. In addition, the high cost the government imposed on the most controversial titles made counterfeiting both profitable and seemingly common.²⁹ Sharing too would have been stimulated. No period after this early one has such clear statistics. It is probable however, that the early 1750s witnessed a decline as peace never attracted as many readers as war. Although the data are

clearly insufficient, an advance in subscriptions must have occurred with the Seven Years War in 1754 and the change in government policy in the late 1750s which permitted entrance to several periodicals. Allowing prices to descend with this relatively free circulation for the foreign press surely achieved results.³⁰ Such efforts undermined many pirated editions³¹ and probably sharing too, but still increases would seem to have been well above the levels of the 1740s. Most probably, circulation and readership sagged at the end of the war until the American Revolution. In this period, the number of titles surged once again and the known circulation figures are very high. Gilles Feyel has estimated the number of foreign periodicals in France at 14,000³² while the domestic newspapers generated close to 30,000 in this period. Briefly, the wildly successful, but relatively shortlived Annales politiques by Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet augmented these figures in the early 1780s by as much as 20,000! Once again, all these numbers ought to be elevated because readers shared copies, though relatively low prices probably discouraged this practice as well as further reducing counterfeiting. In sum, then, legal circulation was approximately four times what it had been in the 1740s even if actual readership had increased by a smaller factor. Following the war another fall in readership occurred, although its dimensions remain unclear.

Table Intro-4 Approximate legal diffusion in France of foreign gazettes

		1 1	U		0 0	
			At Paris		At Avignon	At Lille
	TOTAL	Gazette d'Utrecht	Gazette d'Amsterdam	Gazette de Bruxelles		
1740		140-50				
1742	563	<i>7</i> 3	450	28	1,211	
1743	622				1,375	
1744	631				1,769	
1745	643				2,153	
1746	649			40-50	2,305	
1747	620	137	465		2,482	
1748	565				2,353	
1749	420				1,281	
1753	320					80

^aCombined circulation for a counterfeit *Gazette d' Amsterdam* and the *Courrier d' Avignon*. *Source:* Gilles Feyel, "La Diffusion des gazettes étrangères en France et la révolution postale des années 1750," in Henri Duranton, Claude Labrosse, and Pierre Rétat, *Les Gazettes européennes de langue française (XVHe-XVIIIe siècles)* (St.-Etienne, 1992), pp. 81–99.

Overall then, what may be said of all the genres combined? To advance anything at all requires setting aside, at least for the moment, all but the most important caveats developed in the preceding discussion. Of course, what then follows is quite tentative. In the 1740s there were

approximately 15 long-term periodicals with perhaps a French circulation of over 15,000, depending especially on the level of pirating, a subject in need of more illumination. At the peak in the 1780s, over 80 periodicals, seemingly not amplified by extensive counterfeiting, had an approximate circulation of over 60,000 copies, and temporarily, while Linguet flourished, of many more. Except for Linguet this estimate compares closely with that of Gilles Feyel who simply skips this writer and in addition does not reveal any basis, outside of the political press, for his estimate.33 Furthermore as the analysis here has repeatedly suggested, multiple readers consumed each copy, although this practice varied among genres and circumstances. Feyel has used a factor of approximately four to six readers for each issue, suggesting an audience of 240,000 to 360,000.34 Arriving at an estimate of our current state of knowledge seems difficult. Nonetheless, one may be certain that the last forty years of the Old Regime witnessed an explosion in both periodicals and readers to create a very substantial subject for this study.