The Role of the Press during the Revolutionary Period

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“Still another word on the freedom of the press, Sire, to remove forever a stain thrown on all the French people, and the every foreigner fear and dreads: that one no longer sees one half of the nation suspect of the other half;…. That the French deliver themselves to all the goodness of their character; that they think, that they speak, and act with liberty.” (25)

The anonymous author of *The Year 1789* wrote his work as a letter written to Louis XVI both praising him and citing different issues affecting France. Although the author brought many topics to the king’s attention, one important issue conveyed to the king was the role that different publications and the press would play in French society.

In order to understand the role that the press played leading up to and during the revolution, the societal differences must be better understood. The wealthy controlled France politically, but the lower bourgeoisie and peasantry dominated in terms of population. Carl Burrowes’ article focuses on the way in which the freedom of the press allowed different socio-economic groups to communicate with one another, as well as the political impact this freedom had in France throughout the revolution.1 Harvey Chisick explores assorted forms of publications, namely periodicals such as newspapers and pamphlets, and their varied effectiveness on different social groups leading up to and throughout the revolution.2 Vivian Gruder refines both of these arguments and focuses on the rural populations and ways that changes in freedoms affected them during the

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revolution.³ The gradual liberty gained within the printing industry allowed for both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary ideas to spread more effectively throughout France and reach and influence the majority in eighteenth-century France, the common man.

The political debate between royalists and revolutionaries changed continuously throughout the revolution, and the role the press played between the two groups affected more than just France. During the days of the Old Regime, “the government practiced close censorship of periodicals and did not tolerate independent political reporting.”⁴ Many émigrés, who started to leave as the king began to lose favor, printed pro-monarchy newspapers to reinvigorate the royalists who remained in France. The bad blood between the two sides brought royalist émigrés into direct opposition with those advocating the revolution. Soon, the revolutionary government regulated, censored, and attempted to stop royalist press; the revolutionaries also printed and distributed more of their own press so as to overpower any royalist competition. This censorship came in direct defiance against the principles on which the revolution initially founded itself, that the “rights of man and citizen” dictated the role government would play, not the other way around. However, for the first time in France’s history, journalism became very important in politics and to the public.⁵ This impact of the press resonated throughout all of France, but also to the rest of Europe, and not always in the best way. The effectiveness of the press to empower the people to depose the government frightened Britain so much that, from their own press, “Britain banned incitement of hatred of the

⁴ Chisick, “Pamphlets,” 626.
⁵ Burrowes, “Property,” 47.
government, suspended habeas corpus, required newspaper registration, and increased sedition prosecutions…"6 The power that the printing press demonstrated in France impacted the freedom of the press not only in France but also in other countries.

Although Burrowes’ article focuses on the impacts to society of freedom of the press, Chisick takes this a step further and focuses on different kinds of publications. An important aspect to note during this time period was the speed at which news and philosophies could be spread throughout France. Newspapers and the cahiers de doléances were the main source of literature for the population, but pamphlets became instrumental in the supplementation of these other periodicals. The change in French society forced publications to adapt in order to survive. Pamphlets focused on a more specific issue, without a large range of opinion and left room for less interpretation by the reader. Chisick focuses on a royalist pamphlet publisher that appealed mainly to the more rural communities, communities less affected by the liberal ideals, which emanated from major cities. The Civil Constitution of the Clergy represented one large revolutionary policy that angered the more conservative rural areas and the issue on which the printing company used repeatedly in their publications. The royalist publisher also figured out that printing pamphlets in lieu of traditional periodicals produced massive profits because their philosophies were still distributed and they saved on materials. The table that Chisick uses below demonstrates the vast profit margins that the royalist printing company turned from printing pamphlets against the profit of subscriptions.7 Pamphlets not only became a much more profitable method of spreading

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7 Chisick, “Pamphlets,” 642.
the press, but also a much more effective way by which to reach the greatest number of Frenchmen.

Locked in a constant power struggle, the Assembly and the royalists began to focus on the largest societal group in France: the peasantry. Many of the peasants lived in isolated villages that heard news by way of merchants and travelers, or if they received any sort of publication, the information was never recent. The other form of information came from the priest via government edicts, and this news only reflected official government sanctioned information. In order to extend publications into these regions of France and to express their viewpoints to this societal class, printing companies from both sides refocused their efforts on the peasants. Overcoming the literacy barrier was the first task for the publishers. “Fewer than 30% of the men and fewer than 20% of the
women could read and write” in many of the poorer, rural areas of France.8 Although these individuals could not read or write they were not unintelligent; they understood that they were the individuals on whom the heaviest portion of the tax burden fell. The lack of literacy required that the position of curé be established amongst the peasant communities. The curés acted as a “‘cultural intermediary’ through whom the views of the peasants were ostensibly expressed.”9 With the peasantry able to express their grievances and views of the country, traditional cultural barriers were torn down and freedom of the press extended to all classes, even the illiterate.

The French Revolution marked a period in which a nation began to think about equal rights for all men. Although this idea of equality mainly focused on males, women did gain significant freedoms during the period. These articles do not focus on gender or race roles; rather they centered on the societal differences and how gain the political support of these groups. Before the revolution, very distinct lines existed between the First and Second Estates and the Third estate; the First and Second held the wealth and power, whereas the Third Estate contained most of the population. The population became the key factor for revolutionaries to shift the power away from the wealthy, land-owning elite. Both sides used the press to assist them in communicating throughout the country. In order to spread political beliefs, both liberal and conservative, the printing industry adapted to differing circumstances. Although freedom of the press existed, often those printed words were not distributed in certain parts of France due to conflicting political implications. Also, as the revolution began to turn from the liberal stage into the radical stage, the National Convention, once again, took away this freedom.

8 Gruder, “Peasants,” 170.
The records kept during this era in French history helped the publishing companies then, and historians now, to understand the effectiveness of the different publications. Burrowes discusses the broad topic of the freedom of the press, and the success rates and implementation in different nations in the world. This research centers on the impact freedom of the press had on individuals, and communities as a whole. This qualitative approach helps to understand the mindsets of different cultures and how best to appeal to the readers. Gruder focuses her study on the effect the press had on the peasant population in France. Although she used some numerical measurements on literacy rates, her mention of the curés shows how the peasantry overcame this issue. She also discusses the cultural and political impacts that different publications had on peasants, namely pamphlets. Chisick most strongly uses quantitative data, not only by listing statistics on profit margins and sales, but also with the help of graphs and tables. This makes all of the numerical data presented in the text much more understandable. These three works blend different research techniques, and when used in communion, offer a more thorough understanding of the press and journalism during this time period.

During the French Revolution many aspects of life changed for more than just the French. Austria, Prussia, and France waged war, Britain blockaded French ports, and within France, the people demolished the Old Regime and established a government centered on the rights of the individuals. This government focused on the freedoms granted to each man. One such freedom the monarchial system fostered slightly, but which came to fruition with the Revolution, was the freedom of the press. The freedom

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12 Chisick, “Pamphlets,” 626, 642.
allowed all parties to appeal to more citizens, more quickly and effectively than ever before. This spread the revolution throughout France, which, after becoming bloody, had ramifications directly in contrast of the revolution itself. The ability to infect the citizens of the nation so radically scared the other European nations. Soon many countries began censoring their own papers, in fear that their own country might experience such a revolution. The National Convention, during the radical stage of the revolution, began censoring French publications; only what they approved of could be distributed. The French Revolution triumphed by getting rid of tyranny, only to replace the monarchy with a tyrannical oligarchy. Even though the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen claimed to eradicate suppression of rights, it fell apart, and once again, stripped France of the freedom of the press.