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## Deputies and Journalists

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Imagine a world in which politicians have to adjust to the sudden creation of a 24-hour news cycle, in which long-established mainstream news organs are abruptly discredited and challenged by a constantly multiplying array of new journalistic outlets of varying credibility, and in which news coverage is ideologically polarized to an extreme degree. That was the challenge that the deputies to the Estates General found themselves facing when they convened in May 1789, and it continued to vex and confound their successors throughout the revolutionary decade. As we find ourselves living through a similarly disorienting media revolution in our own time, thinking about the relations between revolutionary legislators and the journalists who publicized their actions, subjected them to often devastating criticism, and sometimes converted themselves into deputies through their writings is not only an important addition to the understanding of the subject to which Timothy Tackett has contributed so much—the parliamentary politics of the Revolution—but a way of gaining some perspective on our own political predicament.

The eighteenth-century French monarchy had learned to live with a certain kind of political journalism that went well beyond the limits supposedly imposed by royal censorship. For more than a century, the gazettes published in territories around France's borders had routinely provided reliable information on major political events within the kingdom, even though they reached their subscribers a week or more after the occurrences they described had taken place. Political pamphlets, harder to control, served as a medium for the expression of opinions. Royal ministers "have become the most carefully observed actors on the stage of the great world, and their performance is the most severely judged," Jacques Necker wrote in 1785.<sup>1</sup> He and other actors on the Old Regime's political stage had learned not only to tolerate the press but to use it for their own advantage. Throughout the absolute monarchy's last decades, the government encouraged the growth and diversification of the press as intendants promoted provincial *affiches* and privileges were granted for an ever-increasing number of specialized periodicals. To be sure, journalists had no formal legal protection and the French government sometimes lashed out at them, as it did when it clapped the most successful political writer of the late 1770s, Simon-Nicholas Linguet, into the Bastille for two years, but such arbitrary measures did not change the fundamental nature of the media system.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Necker, *De l'administration des finances* (N. p., 1785), 1: 6.

<sup>2</sup> For overviews of the eighteenth-century press, see Jack R. Censer, *The French Press in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York: Routledge, 1994), and Jeremy D. Popkin, *News and Politics in the*

The convocation of the Estates General promised to bring about major changes in the country's media system. Imaginative political figures saw a new kind of journalism as a precondition for the new kind of polity they hoped to create. More than anyone else, Honoré Gabriel Riquetti, comte de Mirabeau anticipated how newspapers could create a new kind of public forum that would allow leaders like himself to rally support. In the prospectus for his planned *Journal des Etats Généraux*, issued at the end of April 1789, he wrote that newspapers "propagate instruction and reflect its influence, they unite all good spirits and all dedicated citizens; they establish communications that cannot fail to produce a harmony of sentiments, of opinions, of plans and of actions that constitutes the real public force, the safeguard of the constitution."<sup>3</sup> Mirabeau's prerevolutionary career made him uniquely prepared to exploit the new situation created by the breakdown of the absolutist system. A veteran pamphleteer, he knew how to write effectively. In the mid-1780s, he assembled a media team, his famous "atelier," to share the burden of getting his message out.<sup>4</sup> In 1787, he obtained a privilege for a periodical, the *Analyse des papiers anglois*, ostensibly limited to the translation of articles from the British press, and used it to promote the idea of a declaration of rights and the abolition of the slave trade. Mirabeau not only understood the political value of media publicity: he also understood the moneymaking potential of the press. He expected his newspaper, published by his mistress of the moment, Madame Le Jay, the owner of a Paris printing shop, to provide him with a substantial source of income.

The monarchy had not quite given up hope of maintaining some control over the press when the Estates General opened; Mirabeau's paper and a similar venture announced by his sometime collaborator Jacques-Pierre Brissot were immediately banned, on the grounds that it should be up to the Estates General itself to decide how much publicity about its proceedings to allow. Brissot retreated to writing pamphlets until after the fall of the Bastille, but Mirabeau used his status as a deputy to challenge the ban on his paper. Renaming it *Lettres à mes commettans*, he insisted that he was simply exercising his right to communicate with the electors who had sent him to Versailles. Indeed, many deputies initially saw reporting back to their constituents on the debates and decisions of the Estates, or at least of the Third Estate, as an essential aspect of their role. Timothy Tackett has mined many of these correspondences in *Becoming a Revolutionary*, and some were the basis for provincial newspapers, such as the *Bulletin des correspondances réunies du clergé et de la Sénéchaussée de Rennes* put out in the capital of Brittany in the summer of 1789. The deputy Bertrand Barère's *Point du Jour* differed from these other deputies' correspondences only because he had it printed in Paris and sold commercially. Mirabeau's *Lettres* stood out, however, because they were not just a summary of the Estates General's proceedings but also a passionate commentary on the issues, emanating from one of the principal actors on the scene.

Sufficiently occupied with the daily debates, committee meetings and other obligations, most deputies were happy to give up the obligation of summarizing the proceedings of what soon

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*Age of Revolution: Jean Luzac's Gazette de Leyde* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 46-67.

<sup>3</sup> Prospectus, *Etats Généraux*, n.d.

<sup>4</sup> On Mirabeau's media team, see J. Bénétruy, *L'Atelier de Mirabeau* (Geneva: Jullian, 1962).

became the National Assembly once journalists started to provide satisfactory accounts. The deputy Jean-François Gaultier de Biauzat, whose bulletins from Versailles were published back home in Clermont-Ferrand, considered letting Barère's *Point du Jour* take the place of his own summaries as early as the first week of July 1789, and eventually let the *Journal des Débats et Décrets* fill the function he had originally performed.<sup>5</sup> Acting as a journalist while also performing the duties of a deputy was too demanding for most of the legislators. Mirabeau could do it because he farmed out most of the work to his media team and Barère kept up his paper throughout the session of the National Assembly, but most deputies, if they wanted to publicize their ideas, found it more convenient to rely on publications put out by journalists who were not themselves members of the legislature.

Once the Assembly had relocated to Paris, politicians and journalists encountered each other regularly in the corridors of the Manège, the parliament's improvised meeting-place, in cafés and eventually in the political clubs that became a major feature of the revolutionary political scene. As political factions developed clearer identities, deputies learned that they could depend on titles that shared their party's views—Louis-Sébastien Mercier and Jean-Louis Carra's *Annales politiques* for the Jacobins, Jean-Baptiste Suard's *Gazette universelle* for the constitutional monarchists, Thomas-Maurice Royou's *Ami du Roi* for the anti-revolutionary "noirs"—to applaud their orations and condense their arguments into shorter and more readable form. "Newspapers of record," most famously the publisher Charles-Joseph Panckoucke's *Moniteur universel*, were less politicized but served an essential function by publishing a full account of the Assembly's proceedings, or at least as full an account as its chroniclers, working with primitive systems of stenography, were able to take down. Some deputies, such as Pierre-Louis Roederer with the *Journal de Paris* and Regnault Saint-Jean d'Angély with the *Postillon de Calais*, involved themselves with the press in another way, as owners or part owners of newspapers whose content was mostly written by others.

Although most deputies found this division of labor between legislators and journalists more convenient than trying to play both roles themselves, the model of the deputy-journalist pioneered by Mirabeau in 1789 survived throughout the revolutionary decade, and indeed it continued to characterize French political life long after the Revolution. From the outset of the Revolution, journalism attracted ambitious individuals who thought they deserved to be legislators, such as Brissot and Camille Desmoulins, and they were often reluctant to lay down their pens once they were elected. During the Legislative Assembly, deputies such as Brissot and Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, simultaneously took part in the proceedings and editorialized about them in their newspapers. In the Convention, they were joined by numerous other journalist-deputies: Jean-Louis Carra, Antoine Joseph Gorsas, Desmoulins, François Robert, François-Xavier Audouin, Stanislas Fréron and most famously Jean-Paul Marat, who remained active even after the Convention voted to prohibit the combination of the two functions in March 1793. After a hiatus during the Reign of Terror, the deputy-journalist returned in Thermidor, when Fréron restarted his *Orateur du Peuple* and Jean-Baptiste Louvet revived the Girondin press with his *Sentinelle*, and it survived during the Directory with François Poultier

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<sup>5</sup> François Mège, ed., *Gaultier de Biauzat: Sa Vie et sa correspondance* (Clermont-Ferrand, 1890), 2 :164, 29 Aug. 1789.

d'Elmotte editing a major republican daily, the *Ami des Loix*. Nevertheless, deputy-journalists were always a small and controversial minority. For most revolutionary legislators, the obligations of editing a newspaper were too onerous, and they were happy to let professional journalists handle them. Conversely, some journalists consciously used their publications to promote their campaigns to obtain political office or, as in the case of Maximilien Robespierre in 1792, to maintain their visibility while they were out of the legislature. Just as the majority of deputies were never journalists, however, the majority of newspaper writers never became politicians.

Both deputies and journalists found themselves navigating a largely unfamiliar media landscape.<sup>6</sup> Political news, something of a rare commodity in the Old Regime, now gushed forth from assemblies that met every day, generating an almost unmasterable flood of information. Pre-revolutionary news gazettes appeared once or twice a week, and the country's only daily newspaper, the *Journal de Paris*, carefully avoided political controversies, but daily publication quickly became the norm after July 14, and evening papers were rushed into print so quickly that a deputy's words could be hawked on the streets of Paris on the same day they were uttered. Competition among the thirty or more daily papers appearing in the capital was fierce and put great pressure on journalists to print first and verify information later. By mid-June, Gaultier de Biauzat was complaining about "fake news," in the form of printed copies of an unamended version of Sieyès's motion to establish the "National Assembly" circulating in Paris even as the deputies were still discussing the definitive wording.<sup>7</sup> Long-established "mainstream media" such as the *Gazette de Leyde* and the *Courrier d'Avignon*, generally recognized as impartial and reliable sources of information because they were located outside the reach of the French censorship, suddenly became suspect because they were not published in the "land of liberty," but there was no agreement on which, if any, of the new revolutionary publications could be regarded as authoritative.

The new revolutionary media reached a much larger audience than its Old Regime predecessor and had a much greater impact. In Paris, street hawkers attracted customers by condensing the essence of the day's news into tweet-length summaries shouted at the top of their lungs. Outside of Paris, the postal service delivered papers to subscribers even in the smallest towns and villages. Whereas Old Regime political news might at most generate animated discussions in cafés or around the "arbre de Cracovie," a celebrated meeting place in the Tuileries gardens, revolutionary political news could set off riots and demonstrations. Public reading of newspapers was a customary feature of political club meetings, especially in the provinces. Revolutionary politicians could assume they had a national audience for their speeches.

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<sup>6</sup> On the revolutionary press, see Jeremy D. Popkin, *Revolutionary News: The Press in France, 1789-1799* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990) and Hugh Gough, *The Newspaper Press in the French Revolution* (Chicago: Dorsey, 1988). A particularly insightful analysis of the characteristics of revolutionary journalism is Claude Labrosse and Pierre Rétat, *Naissance du journalisme révolutionnaire* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Mège, ed., *Gaultier de Biauzat*, 2: 128.

Cultivating relationships with individual journalists mattered particularly to the more ambitious, publicity-seeking deputies who spoke regularly in the sessions. Getting their speeches quoted accurately was an issue. The acoustics in the revolutionary assemblies' meeting halls were notoriously bad, and it was not easy for anyone to capture the speakers' words. "There were no stenographers then, and imagination sometimes had to come to the aid of memory," Charles Lacretelle, who started his literary career as a parliamentary reporter for the *Journal des Débats*, recalled in his memoirs.<sup>8</sup> Anyone who has compared the summaries of deputies' speeches in different revolutionary newspapers knows that they often vary significantly. Deputies who delivered prepared speeches could sometimes get them published in a friendly newspaper, or, if they were also journalists, print them themselves, as Brissot regularly did in his *Patriote français*, but the vast majority of the Revolution's parliamentary discourse was filtered through journalists.

Although not every deputy was concerned to appear in the papers, all deputies undoubtedly read them. Then as now, politicians needed to have a sense, not only of what had happened in the assembly, but of how their collective actions were viewed by the public. Some deputies, like Charles-Élie, marquis of Ferrières, conscientiously scanned not only titles that agreed with their political views but also those that opposed them. "One must read everything, be acquainted with everything, otherwise one is nothing but a stubborn fool," he wrote in one of his letters.<sup>9</sup> Taking out a subscription to a *cabinet littéraire* was one way of having access to a wide range of publications without having to pay for personal subscriptions to all of them. Politicians were aware of the influence that particular periodicals might have on their colleagues. During the Directory period, the government not only subsidized certain newspapers but had them distributed for free to the Council deputies.<sup>10</sup>

Deputies themselves came to rely on certain newspapers—Étienne Lehodey de Saultchevreuil's *Journal logographique* in the early months of the Revolution, and then Panckoucke's *Moniteur universel*—to provide a more or less complete record of the assembly debates, and sometimes referred others to these newspapers of record when they themselves could not reproduce their own words. These newspapers used a larger format than the majority of the revolutionary dailies and were also less timely: the *Moniteur's* accounts of debates normally appeared two or three days after the sessions themselves. By this time, public reaction to deputies' interventions had already been shaped by the summaries provided in other newspapers. These were almost invariably highly partisan: editors would give longer extracts from the speeches of deputies who shared their views, and make hostile comments, which deputies objected to as "calumnies," about the views of those they opposed. The press thus tended to circulate bipolar images of the more prominent deputies: heroes in pro-revolutionary newspapers were depicted as villains in the conservative press and vice versa.

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Lacretelle, *Dix années d'épreuves pendant la Révolution* (Paris: Allouard, 1842), 30.

<sup>9</sup> Ferrières, letter of 24 June 1791, in Henri Carré, ed., *Correspondance inédite* (Paris, 1932) 371.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, "Les journaux républicains, 1795-1799," *Revue d'Histoire moderne et contemporaine* 31 (1984): 143-57.

Deputies had to worry not only about the way they were portrayed as individuals in the press, but also about the way newspapers described the assemblies to which they belonged. Whether even the deputies conceived of themselves as an “august Senate,” as the *Journal logographique* described them in its prospectus in the fall of 1790, may be questioned, but journalists certainly did not see them that way. The more comprehensive newspaper transcripts of the debates were, the more they conveyed a chaotic impression of the proceedings. “Today they talk about the constitution, tomorrow, about administration or laws, and, most often, all these subjects become confused together.... Often one doesn’t know if a decree was accepted or sanctioned,” one critic complained.<sup>11</sup> Over the years, journalists exhausted their stock of metaphors as they tried to convey the disorderly character of the more heated legislative sessions. “For an hour, the Assembly presented the spectacle of the sea when a furious tempest raises waves and drives them against each other,” the relatively moderate *Journal de Perlet* wrote about the Convention in November 1792. “What sad reflections does this terrible explosion of human passions give birth to in the spirit of a peaceful man!”<sup>12</sup>

Journalists representing the extremes of the Revolution’s alt-left and alt-right not only lamented the disorder and the rhetorical intensity of legislative proceedings but sought in every possible way to discredit the entire body of deputies. On the left, Marat deployed an inexhaustible vocabulary of abuse against the National Assembly and its successor, the Legislative Assembly. In February 1791, he wrote that the legislators “sometimes look like a horde of madmen who give themselves over to their fury... at other times they resemble a troop of slaves who do everything they can to convince their master of their abjection... or they appear like a collection of imbeciles who allow themselves to be duped by a few shameless charlatans... or they are like a band of thieves at a fair.... But however they disguise themselves, to the philosopher who discerns the spirit that animates them, they are nothing but faithless mandatories, always ready to sell out the interests and rights of the nation to the monarch.”<sup>13</sup> Marat’s colleagues on the extreme right were equally virulent. The *Actes des Apôtres* labeled the deputies “the buffoons of the grand national theater” and repeatedly called for all of them to be hanged, and the *Petit Gautier* exhorted them to “fill your pockets well, all means are good... Plunder, steal, do whatever you want.”<sup>14</sup>

Depending on their personalities and their political goals, individual deputies chose varying strategies for dealing with the press and its journalists. At one extreme was Brissot. An established man of letters before the Revolution, he articulated an exalted vision of journalism from the start of the movement. The epigraph of the *Patriote français*, the newspaper he founded in July 1789, “a free newspaper is a sentinel always watching out for the people,” expressed his conviction of the importance of the press’s function. Brissot was naturally suited to journalism. Never regarded as a particularly dynamic orator, Brissot was undoubtedly more at ease as an editorialist, and it is hard to imagine that he would have achieved such influence on the course of

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<sup>11</sup> Prospectus, *Recueil des Décrets de l’Assemblée nationale* (1791).

<sup>12</sup> *Journal de Perlet*, 6 November 1792.

<sup>13</sup> *Ami du Peuple*, 19 February 1791.

<sup>14</sup> *Actes des Apôtres*, 6: nos. 166-7; *Petit Gautier (Journal général de la cour et de la ville)*, 1 June 1791.

the Revolution without his newspaper. His admiring friend Madame Roland remembered that he “worked very easily, and he composed a treatise the way someone else would copy a song.”<sup>15</sup> Elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1791 and then to the Convention, Brissot continued to edit his paper, assisted by collaborators such as his young assistant Jean-Marie Girey-Dupré. The paper served as a means for him to circulate his most important parliamentary speeches and to promote issues that were close to his heart but not at the top of the legislative agenda, such as rights for free people of color.

Despite his success as a journalist, Brissot was under no illusions about the difficulties that the unrestrained media environment of the Revolution created for political figures like himself. He was constantly assailed by other journalists and pamphleteers, ranging from his prerevolutionary enemy Charles Théveneau de Morande to his one-time friend Marat. “They attack my past life, they insult my probity; I must defend it: my silence has done only too much to embolden the libelers,” he wrote in a ten-page “Reply... to all the libelers who have attacked and attack his past life” included in the 18 August 1791 issue of the *Patriote français*, one of several long screeds his control of the paper allowed him to circulate. Nevertheless, on 10 March 1793, when the Convention finally tried to force him and other journalist-legislators to renounce their editorial functions, Brissot clearly regretted having to “give up the honorable functions of liberty’s apostles.”<sup>16</sup>

Robespierre’s relationship with the press was more distant. In May 1791, he gave one of the Revolution’s most emphatic speeches in defense of journalistic freedom, insisting on its necessity “in order to contain the ambition and the despotism of those to whom the people has entrusted its authority, by constantly drawing attention to the attacks they may make on its rights.” He insisted he would never seek punishment, “even for those who cover my name with the most infamous calumnies.” “In two words,” he concluded, “either one must renounce liberty, or consent to the unrestricted freedom of the press. As far as public persons are concerned, the question is decided.”<sup>17</sup> In 1792 he briefly put out his own periodical, the *Défenseur de la Constitution*, at a time when he was out of office and needed to justify his unpopular position as an opponent of the war. In the prospectus to his publication, he professed to applaud politicians who had managed to combine “two almost equally important functions, to explain and judge on the next day the operations to which they had contributed the day before in the National Assembly,” but he asserted that such a double obligation would have been too much for him.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Brissot’s *Patriote français*, Robespierre’s paper, mostly made up of lengthy and abstract political disquisitions, never acquired much of an audience, and he gave it up once he was elected to the Convention.

As his Montagnard faction gained increasing power, Robespierre became steadily more suspicious of the press. In April 1793, he warned that “the interest of the Revolution may

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<sup>15</sup> Madame Roland, *Mémoires de Madame Roland*, ed. C. A. Dauban (Paris: Plon, 1864), 230.

<sup>16</sup> *Patriote Français*, 3 April 1793.

<sup>17</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Discours sur la liberté de la presse* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1791), 14, 17, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Prospectus for *Défenseur de la Constitution*, in *Révolutions de Paris*, 21 April 1792 (no. 146)

demand certain measures to repress a conspiracy founded on the freedom of the press,” a reference to the Girondin papers.<sup>19</sup> In December 1793, when the Jacobin Club purged its members, Robespierre personally went after the journalist Claude Milscent, even though his *Créole patriote* had been, for a time, the recognized chronicler of the Jacobins’ proceedings. When Milscent successfully rebutted Robespierre’s claim that his paper had printed hostile articles about him, Robespierre retorted “that indeed, he now remembered that Milscent used to praise him, but that it was only in order to better conceal his perfidy,” and maintained his demand that Milscent be expelled.<sup>20</sup> In effect, there was nothing a journalist could do to avoid Robespierre’s wrath. Milscent was purged from the club and, a few months later, convicted by the Revolutionary Tribunal and executed.

Despite the remorseless hostility Robespierre came to show toward journalists by 1793, Revolutionary politics could not function without them. Even after the executions of Jacques Hébert, the “Père Duchêne,” and Desmoulins, the “Vieux Cordelier,” in the spring of 1794, the press was never subjected to the kind of *Gleichschaltung* characteristic of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. Indeed, journalists still had a certain freedom to print the words of the deputies even after they recognized that it was too risky to make any explicit commentary on them. At the height of the Terror, the *Moniteur* continued publishing the proceedings of the Convention as well as those of the Jacobin club and the Commune assembly. Several papers transmitted the deputy François Louis Bourdon de l’Oise’s objections to the law of 22 prairial An II, for example, giving readers a hint of the dissensions that would explode on 9 thermidor. After that event, press freedom widened again and was only slightly reined in by the waves of repression that followed the insurrection of 13 vendémiaire An IV and 18 fructidor An V. It took the full-blooded authoritarianism of the Napoleonic regime to reduce both the deputies and the journalists to real conformity.

Whether they liked it or not, throughout the revolutionary decade, legislators worked in the media fishbowl created almost overnight in 1789. Even deputies who rarely opened their mouths depended on newspapers to give them a sense of public opinion, and all of them were affected by the collective image of the assemblies created by the press. Those with personal ambitions had to learn to cultivate supportive journalists and cope with hostile ones, and some either saw writing and editing as a complement to their legislative careers or even used journalistic success as a springboard to gain legislative office. As we follow in the footsteps of Timothy Tackett by seeking a fuller understanding of what was involved in becoming a revolutionary, we should recognize the importance of this dimension of the period’s political life. And as we contemplate the lessons of the French Revolution for our own day, it is useful to recognize that we are not the first generation to find our fate in the hands of politicians who are either struggling to cope with a rapidly changing media landscape or else are exploiting the media’s possibilities in new and often unsettling ways.

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<sup>19</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, speech of 19 Apr. 1793, in *Oeuvres complètes de Maximilien Robespierre* (Paris: Société des études robespierristes, 1910-1967), 9 :452.

<sup>20</sup> *Créole patriote*, 11 nivôse II (31 December 1793).



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