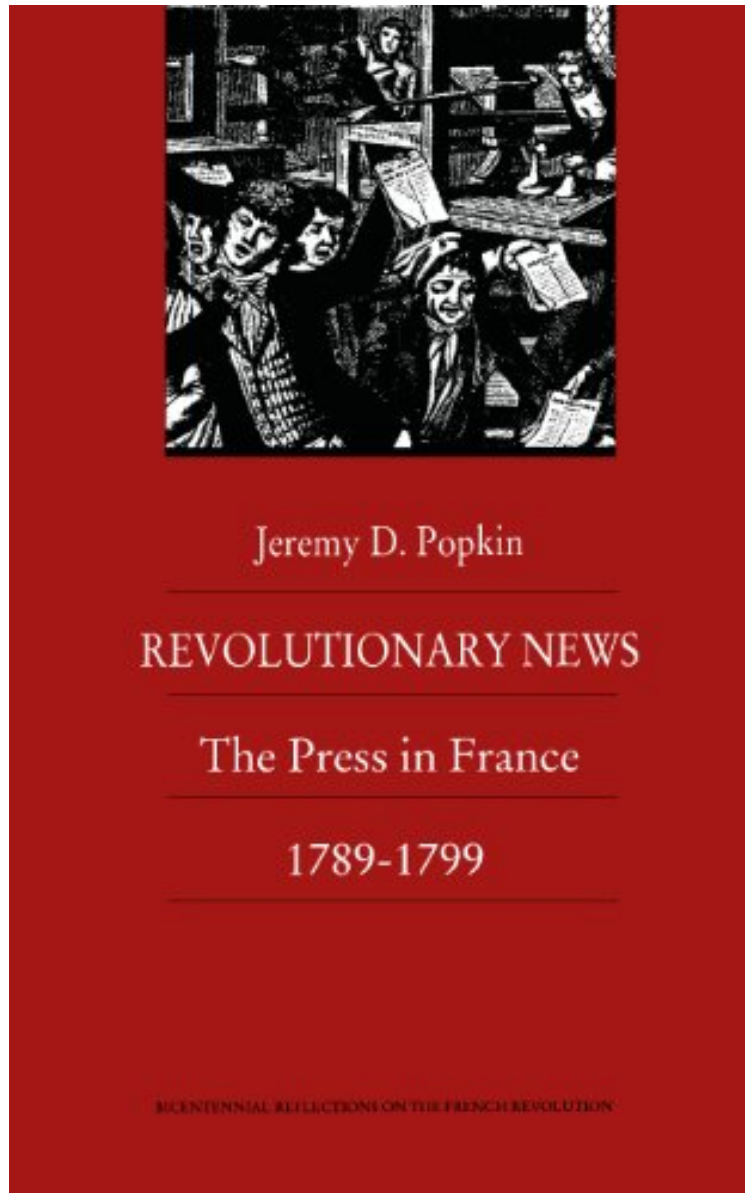


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Revolutionary News: The Press in France, 1789-1799 (Bicentennial reflections on the French Revolution)

Von Jeremy Popkin

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Von Jeremy Popkin : Revolutionary News: The Press in France, 1789-1799 (Bicentennial reflections on the French Revolution) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Revolutionary News: The Press in France, 1789-1799 (Bicentennial reflections on the French Revolution):

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Revolutionary news--revolutionary approach and insights Von frefalln@aol.com In 1837, historian Thomas Carlyle, in regards to journalism during the French Revolution, wrote: One Sansculottic bough that cannot fail to flourish is Journalism. The voice of the people being the voice of God, shall not such divine voice make itself heard? Is not every Able Editor a Ruler of the World . . .? They made the walls of Paris didactic, suasive [sic], with an ever-fresh periodical literature. . . To-day swallowing Yesterday, and then being in its turn swallowed of Tomorrow. . . . [periodical literature] circulate on street and highway, universally; with results! A Fourth Estate, of Able Editors, springs up; increases and multiplies; irrepressible and incalculable. In this energetic summation of the Revolutionary periodical press, Carlyle touches upon many of the issues which present-day historians of the period, in a wave of publications coinciding with the Bicentennial celebration, have addressed. The reasons for the upsurge in print studies of this age are many: new structural and discursive theories, an emphasis on politics and culture, the use of literary genre for historical insight, and the shift away from the classical Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution. Nineteenth-century historians relied heavily upon newspapers as source materials in their chronological narrative of events. Recent studies of the revolutionary-era press, however, surpass the use of newsprint as a methodological tool, and instead, make the tool the object of investigation. For Jeremy Popkin, author of *Revolutionary News*, newspapers serve not "as simple reflections of politics, [but] rather as one of the forces shaping the course of the Revolution." (10) Popkin thus assigns a central role to the press, and validates newspapers and journals as indispensable to scholars rather than of interest only to those who Carlyle described as "bibliomaniac pearl divers." Popkin's work stands amongst an interpretation of the revolution which stresses the importance of discourse. In focusing on the medium (the press) for transmitting the new political culture to the people, Popkin arrives at the same interpretation as Lynn Hunt, albeit by a different path. Popkin describes the journalists, editors, and readers, the operations and technology of the press, and the differences and similarities of the Old Regime and Revolutionary-era presses. The author demonstrates that only a medium as pervasive and persuasive, could capture the frenetic spirit of events and make them intelligible for its readers. Popkin claims that newspapers functioned as the heart of representative democratic politics not only by relaying the speeches in the Assembly, but in making them public. (2) The press served as a vital link or virtual representative for the people, ensuring the openness of proceedings and in the process sanctifying the sovereignty of the government. The press presumed to represent public opinion for citizens lacking an operable public sphere. (4) Thus the press, as a commercial enterprise at the nexus of government and the citizenry, "molded the dispersed and fragmentary events . . . into intelligible form, labeled them, and validated their results by presenting them as public manifestations of the public's will." (5) However, Popkin also reveals that "politics and calculations of marketability were rarely separated in the revolutionary press." (8) Though the Revolutionaries called for freedom of the press, a lack of a definitive program meant that "the new press for the new era dawning in France . . . would be shaped by the initiatives of journalists, publishers and politicians," rather than the citizen readers. (27) This reality stands in sharp contrast to the "utopian vision of a press . . . as a modern version of the agora of Athens"-the classical public space of political communion. (28) Popkin takes the reader into the press shops, where men worked late into the night to supply an expanding readership albeit in an increasingly competitive market. On the whole the industry was characterized by "cut-throat competition" as noted by Popkin, which parallels the political struggles in the Assembly upon which the papers reported. (71) However, the lack of technological improvements restricted the number of copies, and prevented the press from attaining the level of mass-medium which could reach the sum of adult readers. (85) The focus of the author's insights into the industry, the journalists, and the readers, converge to support the thesis of an emerging political culture. The papers did not merely reflect political ideology, they were affirmations of political choices. Newspapers facilitated the goals of the Revolution--collectivity and simultaneity. The author writes that "newspapers organized their readers into a cohesive collectivity, capable of reacting to the same events at the same time." (94-95) The speeches of the day were not for the most part relayed without commentary. Instead writers cast speakers in the familiar roles of heroes and villains according to the corresponding political script. (114) This act amplified the rhetoric and helped to define the parties. Popkin valorizes the journalists, publishers, and editors, as "pioneers" in constructing a "democratic political culture" by involving the lower classes in debates and providing both a language and a forum for the debates. (146) While the author's work is suggestive of new areas of inquiry, to his credit, Popkin always reigns in his passion for the subject and does not assign a role of strict determinism to the press--an admirable position and nod towards objectivity quite uncharacteristic of the field of French Revolution history. Perhaps his greatest ability comes in interpreting and relating the polemics of the press without adopting its intoxicating language of advocacy. The only discernible (and quite trivial flaw) is the use of publisher terms such as "octavo" and "quarto" whose meaning may escape the general reader. As an enterprise, both commercial and political, at the convergence of the government and the public wills, the press represents "a collective creation of a society searching for new ways to govern itself." (39) As Popkin demonstrates, in the course of this political search for identity (in an age with a manic tendency for the new, the novel, the deconstruction of the past in favor of a utopian future), politics was

revolutionized, but news was revolutionized as well. San Jose State University

KurzbeschreibungThe newspaper press was an essential aspect of the political culture of the French Revolution. *Revolutionary News* highlights the most significant features of this press in clear and vivid language. It breaks new ground in examining not only the famous journalists but the obscure publishers and the anonymous readers of the Revolutionary newspapers. Popkin examines the way press reporting affected Revolutionary crises and the way in which radical journalists like Marat and the Pere Duchene used their papers to promote democracy.