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On: 04 February 2014, At: 07:35

Publisher: Routledge

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European Romantic Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gerr20>

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Published online: 03 May 2013.

To cite this article: Robert Darnton (2013) Blogging, Now and Then (250 Years Ago), *European Romantic Review*, 24:3, 255-270, DOI: [10.1080/10509585.2013.789694](https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2013.789694)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2013.789694>

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Blogging, Now and Then (250 Years Ago)

Robert Darnton*

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Long before the Internet, Europeans exchanged information in ways that anticipated blogging. The key element of their information system was the “anecdote,” a term that meant nearly the opposite then from what it means today. Anecdotes, dispensed by “libellistes” and “paragraph men,” became a staple in the daily diet of news consumed by readers in eighteenth-century France and England. They were also pilfered, reworked, and served up in books. By tracking anecdotes through texts, we can rethink the history of books and reassess a rich strain of history and literature.

Many people today feel they are living through a revolution as great as that in the era of Gutenberg, and the feeling isn’t comfortable.¹ The ground seems to shift beneath our feet as the information landscape changes before our eyes. We are bombarded by information, and it comes in tiny units – sound bites, flashbacks, snippets, tweets. It strikes our consciousness like pellets of rain on a windshield, so thick and fast that we cannot get a clear view of the surrounding landscape. How to make sense of it all?

We might begin by acknowledging the fragmentary character of information in general, not just today but in the distant past. Hundreds of years before the Internet, an early modern variety of blogging kept a vast public of readers fascinated with the kind of material that now appears in the *Drudge Report* and the *Huffington Post* – that is, scandal. Of course, a lot of other material also circulated through the channels of communication in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I want to concentrate on gossip mongering, despite its seeming triviality, because it can tell us a lot about the media, the messages they transmitted, and the way information systems operated.

Moreover, it is not as trivial as we commonly suppose. Consider this observation by Stendhal: “Just think that what fools despise as gossip is, on the contrary, the only history that, in this affected age, gives a true picture of a country . . . We need to see everything, experience everything, make a collection of anecdotes” (Stendhal 15: 174, quoted in Gossman 162). Stendhal was expressing an eighteenth-century concept of the anecdote and a widespread practice that Louis Sébastien Mercier described as “anecdotomanie” (*Néologie* 60). I will discuss the views held under the *Ancien Régime* shortly, but first I would like to offer some background information about gossip.

The greatest gossip monger of the past, the Ur-grandfather of the whiz kids at PerezHilton and Gawker, was Pietro Aretino, who rose to fame in the early sixteenth century from the sonnets he composed and pasted on the statue of a figure known as

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Pasquino, located off the Piazza Navona in Rome (Figure 1). The sonnets ridiculed cardinals who were candidates for the papacy in the pontifical election of 1522. They succeeded so well that they gave rise to a genre: short, slanderous lampoons known as *pasquinate*, *pasquinades*, or pasquinades. Pasquinades have appeared in public places for the last five hundred years. The statue of Pasquino still serves as a bulletin board in Rome, and short, slanderous notices appear everywhere on walls during periods of crisis, such as the student uprising of May–June 1968. Many current graffiti descend from Aretino, and they illustrate the main theme that I want to develop – namely, that information comes in fragments and embeds itself in whatever niches are provided by the surrounding environment.

The most effective niches today are websites, and the modern equivalent of the pasquinade is a posting on a blog. The parallel isn't perfect, I know; in fact, it is outrageously anachronistic, but I want to use it as a provocation for rethinking the nature of books. I should also acknowledge that websites contain many kinds of information, and only a minority of blogs specialize in scandal mongering. Moreover, scandal was mongered during the early modern period in many forms beside the pasquinade. The most common was known as the “anecdote,” a key term, which I will come back to in a moment. For now, I would like to illustrate some cases where the parallel seems valid – that is, modern blogs that resemble eighteenth-century anecdotes. I will choose examples from recent postings on the Web and from a notorious “gazette scandaleuse” from 1771, *Le Gazetteur cuirassé, ou anecdotes scandaleuses de la cour de France* (The Iron-Plated Gazetteer, or scandalous anecdotes about the French court).

A typical posting from a gossip blog, *Thesuperficial.com* (25 February 2010) reads: “Carrie Prejean is living in sin.” The accompanying picture conveys a message beyond



Figure 1. Statue of Pasquino in Rome (left) and notes posted on walls in Paris during the student uprising of May–June 1968 (right). [Public domain.]

the power of the printed word. But consider the caption in isolation: “RadarOnline reports ‘traditional marriage’ crusader and former Miss California Carrie Prejean is living in sin with her fiancé Kyle Boller of the St. Louis Rams where they’re no doubt eating shellfish. BURN THEM!” It is very short, just one sentence, except for the ironic kicker at the end, “Burn them.” And it reworks its material from another blog, *RadarOnline*; so blogging often involves recycling material from other sources, including other blogs – a point I want to emphasize, because recycling of this sort, known as “aggregating” today, was also a widespread practice in the publishing of anecdotes in the eighteenth century.

Here is a translation of a similar anecdote from *Le Gazetier cuirassé*: “It is said that Mlle. Romans [a notorious actress] will marry M. de Croismare, governor of the *Ecole militaire*, who will take six aides de camp from the first class of his school to perform the conjugal duty in his place” (82). Again, it is a kind of news flash, in one sentence, and it contains an implicit reference to recycling information from another medium, in this case rumor, known in French as an “on dit” (“it is said . . .”).

The comparison doesn’t work as well as it might, because the French text lacks pictures. Occasionally, however, engravings accompanied anecdotes from the eighteenth century, as in the case of an illustration from an English scandal sheet, the *New Foundling Hospital for Wit*, from 1769. It shows George III blindfolded and being led by a leash attached to his nose by his mother, the princess dowager, who makes an obscene gesture to the Earl of Bute, her supposed lover and the main power behind the government, who lurks behind a tree, signaling his presence by his emblematic boot. It’s not very different from a blog by *Perezhilton.com* (21 January 2010) that ridiculed the mayor of Las Vegas when he was running for governor “with showgirls on his arm.” Sex and politics provided inexhaustible material for ancient anecdotes as well as modern blogs. Public figures always provided targets, even when the news reports focused on trivial incidents.

A political blog from *theawl.com* (8 June 2009) makes fun of stalwarts from the British Labour Party by means of a two-sentence anecdote about a minor accident – a Labour MP got bumped by a cow – which supposedly illustrated the fact that everyone, even animals, had come to detest British politicians during the last years of the Labour government. A similar and even shorter report of a supposed accident concerning a former foreign secretary of Louis XV read: “It has been confirmed that Monsieur the duc de Prasl[in], having bitten his finger while chewing on his nails, has fallen into a state of self-poisoning [*un accès d’hydrophobie*], which carried him off within twenty-four hours” (*Le Gazetier cuirassé* 27). This anecdote would easily fit on Twitter as a tweet.

Having heated up during recent election campaigns, the rakish side of politics continues to sizzle on the Web today. The scandal surrounding representative Anthony Weiner, who sent obscene photos of himself to woo a woman on the Web soon after his wife became pregnant, gave bloggers a field day, and it was mild compared with the blogging connected with the sex scandal that forced Dominique Strauss-Kahn out of the French presidential race in May 2011. The sexual-political scandal mongering from the eighteenth century is very similar, although the gossip often dwelt on subjects with special shock-value for an early modern public, such as venereal disease in high places: “Rumors are circulating that the young vicomte du Barry is in [the prison of] Pierre-Encise for having given the countess of the same name certain little worries about her health, which she communicated in the same manner to the king” (*Le Gazetier cuirassé* 44). By the same token, today’s blogs are tintured by allusions that appeal

to today's readers: thus the off-color gossip about federal judges in *Underneath Their Robes*, a blog developed by "desk jockey lawyers." But despite the different contexts, the themes remained essentially the same from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. Then as now, the gossip often shaded off into the genre of the dirty joke. The Weiner blogs punned endlessly on his name, as in this typical headline: "Weiner's Weiner All Over the Internet, While Weiner's Wife Is Pregnant." A similar attempt at ribald humor from the eighteenth century reads: "The duke of . . . surprised his wife in the arms of his son's tutor. She said to him with the impudence of a courtier, 'Why weren't you there, Monsieur? When I don't have my squire, I take the arm of my lackey'" (Boudeaux 1: 37).

Sex among public figures provided endless material for eighteenth-century pamphleteers just as it does for today's bloggers. In some ways, the eighteenth century offered a broader range of targets, because its gossips could play on the widespread hostility toward the clergy and the Court: "The Chancellor, it is asserted, doesn't treat his women in a way to keep them for long, as he was caught having scandalous 'affinities' with some Jesuits; the lieutenant general of the Parisian police reproached him in person for having had commerce with five members of that society in three days" (*Le Gazetier cuirassé* 41). Bloggers, however, are able to take aim at movie stars. A *Gawker* headline quotes an aged Warren Beatty: "I Did Not Have Sex With 13,000 Women." Sex among seniors also tickled the fancies of readers before the advent of Hollywood, thanks to the inexhaustible appeal of anticlericalism: "It is said that the curate of Saint Eustache was caught in flagrante delicto with the deaconess of the sisters of charity in his parish, which would be greatly to their honor, since they are both in their eighties" (*Le Gazetier cuirassé* 51).

I could go on and on citing examples, but I don't want to overdo it. Historians can always select evidence to make the present look like the past. By doing so, they create a specious sense of continuity: *plus ça change et plus c'est la même chose*; the more things change, the more it's the same. But I am not arguing that twenty-first-century blogs are the same thing as eighteenth-century anecdotes or that history is repeating itself through the Internet. On the contrary, I want to point out the differences underlying the similarities in order to understand something about information: not only its fragmentary character but the way those fragments fit together. Scandal has always existed, and reports about it have often come in bits and pieces – furtive remarks, scribbles on scraps of paper, images on iPads. But these tidbits of information do not exist in isolation. They circulate in communication systems, which are shaped by the currently available media and are peculiar to time and place. Blogs and anecdotes warrant study, because they can help us understand how information operates.

First, consider blogs.² Seen in a broad context, they belong to the realignment of the media in what has become a new information ecology. Free and instant communication through the Web has undercut the traditional role of newspapers. Their revenue from advertising, and especially want ads, has plummeted, because readers search for jobs and consumer information online. Readers increasingly get their news online, too. Print papers have reduced the number of their column inches, closed bureaus, fired staff, and gone out of business. Sixteen thousand journalistic jobs disappeared in 2008, and since then the situation has got worse. Despite the online editions of a few excellent newspapers, online news tends to be short and superficial, and a large proportion of it takes the form of blogs. Anyone can easily set up a website and publish news reports (or anything else) by using a blogging platform such as *www.blogspot.com*. As bloggers

often have particular obsessions, they appeal to particular sectors of the public such as movie buffs (*PerezHilton*), political junkies (*Wonkette*), college students (*Ivy Gate*), and lawyers (*Above the Law*). But all of them conform to a formula of old-fashioned tabloid journalism: names make news. By the end of the first decade in the twenty-first century, the blogger was replacing the reporter.

That is an oversimplification, because some seasoned reporters like Andrew Sullivan and Josh Marshall have made successful transitions to the Web, and most bloggers do not deal in news; they post reports that read like personal diaries. But the Web contains so many sites that readers seeking newsy information are likely to gravitate to aggregating websites like the *Huffington Post*, which amalgamate information through ceaseless searches on the Web. The aggregators make money from advertisements, and they hire bloggers who comb the Web for material and add comments of their own, the snarkier, the better. The pay is miserable, if it exists at all. Until recently it was twelve dollars per post for twelve posts a day for the top people at Gawker Media. But the bloggers tend to be young people like Emily Gould, who developed her blogging skills as an amateur in college and migrated to New York, where Gawker provided her with a way to break into the media world. Bloggers exist in a peculiar social space on the margins of the movie industry in Los Angeles, the magazine trade in New York, and the respectable world of journalism everywhere. They often live down-and-out in Brooklyn or Boston just like the hack writers who inhabited the Grub Streets of London and Paris in the eighteenth century. And the gossip in their posts expresses “the anxiety and class rage of New York’s creative underclass,” as Vanessa Grigoriadis puts it (4).

Now let’s examine some of the shards of information that circulated in London and Paris 250 years ago, beginning with London. Here is a notice in the *Morning Post* of 13 December 1784 about an English gentleman turned gigolo in the service of Marie-Antoinette in Paris:

The Gallic Queen is partial to the English. In fact, the majority of her favourites are of this country; but no one has been so notoriously supported by her as Mr. W____. Though this gentleman’s purse was known to be *dérangé* when he went to Paris, yet he has ever since lived there in the first style of elegance, taste, and fashion. His carriages, his liveries, his table, have all been upheld with the utmost expense and splendor.

Like most modern blogs, it is very short, only one paragraph, and it appears in a column composed of similar paragraphs, one more slanderous than the other. I would like to pause over the notion of the paragraph, which was the English equivalent of the anecdote in eighteenth-century France. Unlike France, where newspapers were heavily censored, England had a booming, rough-and-ready journalistic culture.³ London’s first daily began publication in 1702, whereas Paris did not have a daily until 1777, and it contained very little news, certainly nothing that could offend the government, because of the censorship. In 1788, London had ten dailies, eight tri-weeklies, and nine weekly newspapers – more than it has today, and their content was often more scandalous. Yet their appearance, to the modern eye, was staid.

Figure 2 shows two pages from a 1784 edition of the *Morning Post*. Like most London newspapers, they look like a sea of print: undifferentiated paragraphs piled up in columns, four columns to a page, from four to eight pages in an edition. The paragraphs are autonomous units. They succeed each other pell-mell, without any concern for coherence in their subject matter. You cannot even distinguish them from advertisements. They are not set off by headlines or any other kind of typographical articulation, except occasional leading or lines. News “stories,” as we call them today – narratives

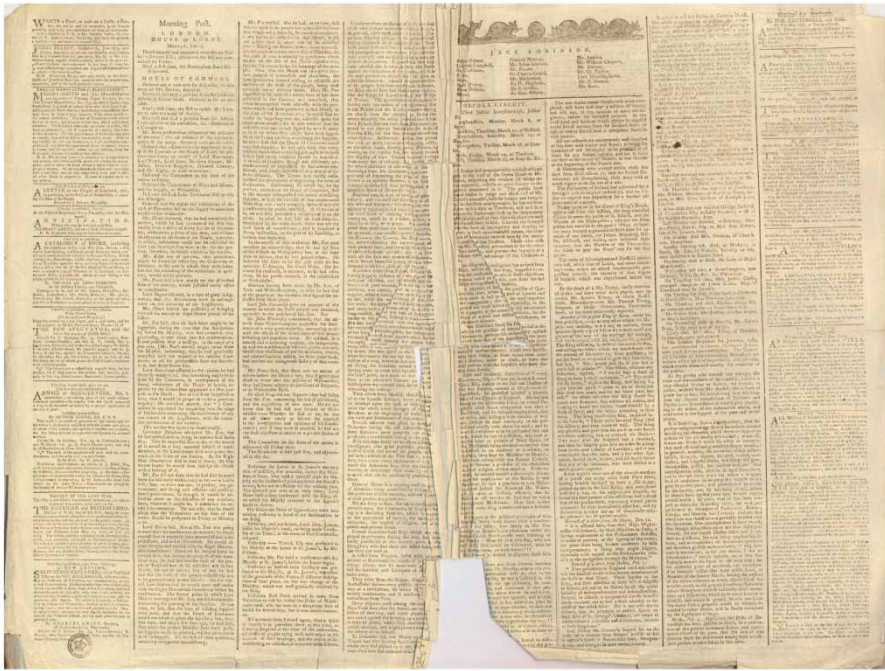


Figure 2. Pages from London's *Morning Post* (1784). [Source: British Library.]

of several hundred words – did not exist. Information came in fragments, as a succession of unrelated paragraphs.

Until 1771, when reports on parliamentary debates were tolerated and political coverage became more extensive, newspapers did not have real reporters and editors or much in the way of professional staff. They depended for copy on “paragraph men” who picked up information in coffee houses and reduced it to a few sentences on a scrap of paper, which could be set in type and inserted in the next available space of a column on the composing stone. A German visitor to London in the 1760s marveled at the proliferation of “paragraph writers, who go to coffee houses and public places to pick up anecdotes and the news of the day, which they reduce to short sentences and are paid in proportion to their number and authenticity.”⁴ Coffee houses served as filters for all kinds of information, whether it came in pamphlets and newspapers or rumors, political disputes, and reports on finance and shipping. It was easily compressed into paragraphs by men who sold it to editors or provided it free of charge in order to promote interests of their own.

As you can see by this contemporary print (Figure 3), bits of paper circulated everywhere along with talk in coffee houses. The coffee house therefore served as an important stage in the diffusion of news where oral and written messages came together. The next stage was in the printing shop. Figure 4 shows an eighteenth-century printing shop, and it is very accurate in its details, although it pictures the workers as devils, who are printing scandal sheets.

During the early eighteenth century, most London newspapers limited themselves to the “freshest advices” about anodyne subjects like the arrival of ships and events in foreign countries. A new tone of outspokenness and provocation set in, at least



Figure 3. Interior of a London Coffee-house, late seventeenth century. [Source: British Library]

among the papers of the West Side, during the Wilkite agitation of the 1760s, and a new variety of scandalous journalism took root with the founding of the *Morning Post* in 1772 by the Reverend Henry Bate. Although he was a clergyman (chaplain to Lord Lyttleton), Bate specialized in scandal mongering, and he slandered his victims so outrageously that they demanded satisfaction, “with sword and fist and pistol” (Werkmeister 22). He demolished them in a series of fights and duels, which increased the sales of his



Figure 4. “The Art and Mystery of Printing” from *The Grub Street Journal*, 26 October 1732. The devil on the right is hanging up a recently printed scandal sheet to dry. [British Library.]

paper and earned him the title of “the Reverend Bruiser.” Bate eventually quit the *Morning Post* and founded a rival and equally scandalous paper, the *Morning Herald*. The *Post* then hired an even more vitriolic editor, who was also a clergyman, Reverend William Jackson, known as “Dr. Viper” for “the extreme and unexampled virulence of his invectives . . . in that species of writing known as paragraphs” (Werkmeister 80). The two men of the cloth, Reverend Bruiser and Dr. Viper, slugged it out in their newspapers, making scandal and sensationalism a staple ingredient of English journalism.

Scandal mongering in eighteenth-century France commonly took the form of *anecdotes*, a term that one encounters everywhere in underground literature such as *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry*. It could be used as an equivalent to the English notion of a journalistic “paragraph,” because most anecdotes, when they appeared in news-sheets, were reduced to paragraphs consisting of only a few sentences. But the word had a particular connotation. “Anecdote” in the eighteenth century meant nearly the opposite of what it suggests today. We think of anecdotes as brief accounts of relatively trivial incidents, and we don’t give them much credence, as indicated by the expression “anecdotal evidence,” meaning information that is untrustworthy or unconfirmed and possibly false. In eighteenth-century usage, an anecdote referred to something true – that is, something that had really happened but had been kept secret or suppressed. Thus the standard definition from the dictionary of the Académie française in 1718: “a particular circumstance of history, which had been omitted or suppressed by previous historians.” And the first example cited is the *Anecdotes* of Procopius. Samuel Johnson produced a similar definition in his dictionary: “Something yet unpublished, secret history. It is now used, after the French, for a biographical incident; a minute passage of private life.” Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* elaborated on this definition in a way that brought out its implications: “This word is used in literature to signify the secret history of facts that happened in the inner cabinet or courts of princes and in the mysteries of their politics (*dans les mystères de leur politique*).” Politics in the eighteenth century was considered a mystery or a secret that took place in “privy” or “secret” cabinets (Privy Council, *Conseil privé*, *Geheimrat*) and by its nature should be hidden from the public. It belonged to the secret sphere known as “arcane imperii” or “le secret du roi.”

The reference to Procopius, the Byzantine historian of the sixth century A.D., crops up everywhere, and the *Encyclopédie* article explains why. In his formal histories, Procopius covered the main characters – the Emperor Justinian, his consort Theodora, his general Belisarius – with praise. But he also wrote secret histories, known as *Anecdota*, which exposed the sordid private lives of the same people and made their personal depravity serve as an explanation for the decadent state of the Roman Empire. To writers and readers of the eighteenth century, “anecdotes” expressed a Procopian strain in history – the true story of the secret elements that determined the course of events. In practice that often meant revelations about the private lives behind public affairs. Dozens of “private lives” appeared throughout the eighteenth century, all of them pretending to be secret histories recounted by means of anecdotes. The two best known works in this genre in pre-revolutionary France were *Vie privée de Louis XV, ou principaux événements, particularités et anecdotes de son règne* (1781) (*The Private Life of Lewis XV, in which are contained the principal events, particularities, and anecdotes of his reign*) and *Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry* (1775) (*Anecdotes about Mme la comtesse du Barry*). The preface to the du Barry book elaborated on the notion of anecdotes:

Although this work is a very complete life of Madame la comtesse du Barry, the author has preferred to give it the modest title of *Anecdotes* in order to avoid every suggestion of pretentiousness. In this way he has freed himself from the formal order and stylistic gravity that would have been required by a more imposing title . . . But no one should believe that by laboriously pulling together so much [information] he has thoughtlessly included the large number of fables and absurdities, which are recounted about this famous courtesan . . . As will be apparent, he cites evidence for everything that he asserts, from her birth until her retirement. In this regard, he has observed the scrupulous rules of an historian. (*Anecdotes*, preface [n.p.]

Of course, sophisticated readers did not take this sales talk seriously. Although anecdotes were defined as hidden truths, they were often understood to be half truths. In fact, they sometimes presented themselves in this way, teasing the reader with winks and nudges that belonged to a rhetorical game that was peculiar to some kinds of light literature in the eighteenth century. A note in a French *chronique scandaleuse* informs the reader, tongue in cheek, “Half of this article is true” (*Le Gazetier cuirassé* 34). Which half? It is up to the reader to decide.

Where did anecdotes originate? From gossip, rumor, and what the French called “public noises” (*bruits publics*). Parisian cafés, like London coffee houses, were key nerve centers in an oral communication system. The French equivalent of the English paragraph man was the “nouvelliste” or news-man, who stationed himself in a café – or some other diffusion point such as a certain bench in the Luxembourg Gardens or the Tree of Cracow in the garden of the Palais-Royal – in order to pick up anecdotes. He would scribble the latest tidbit on a scrap of paper; and when he had an ample supply, he would retire to his garret and transcribe the anecdotes onto bulletins known as “nouvelles à la main.” These manuscript news-sheets were then copied and sold to subscribers throughout France and the rest of Europe.

The whole business was illegal, but it was so widespread that the police tolerated moderate *nouvellistes* and occasionally even collaborated with them. One protégé of the police, a scribbler named Foulhioux, operated from a certain table in the Café du Caveau, one of the greatest rumor mills in Paris. Once, after he published something that displeased the powers in Versailles, a police inspector showed up at the table and hauled him off to the Bastille. His defense during his interrogation was that he had only written down what everyone was saying and that his gazette was nothing more than “the echo of public noises” (Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. fr. 22150).

I mention this incident because it illustrates the importance of oral communication as a source of news. Strictly speaking, information about current politics could not appear in print, and the French did not have anything comparable with the outspoken English press. Newspapers existed, but they could not discuss affairs of state, which was the king’s business. They had to obtain a privilege from the king and to submit to strict censorship. By 1780, fifteen French-language journals were published outside France and permitted to circulate within the kingdom, but they, too, were subject to censorship or sanctions such as exclusion from the postal system.

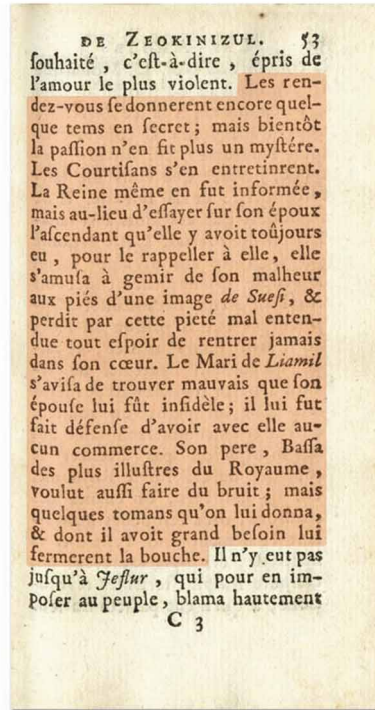
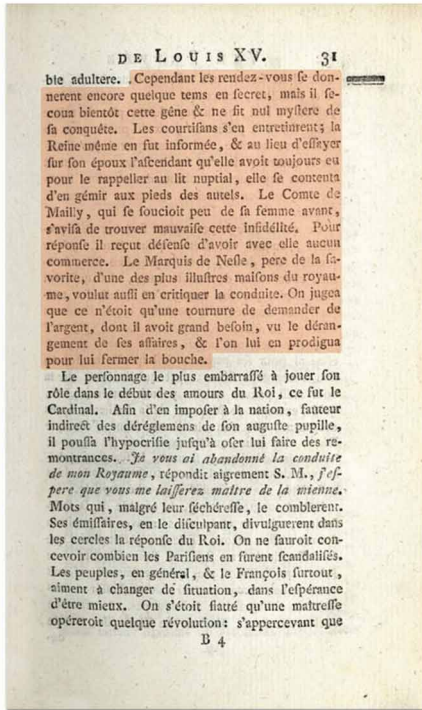
Manuscript *nouvelles à la main* were the main chink in this tightly-controlled system. They belonged to a separate system of underground information, and the crucial ingredient in this system was the anecdote – a witty remark, a doggerel poem, a tidbit of gossip – jotted down on a scrap of paper. When the police arrested a *nouvelliste*, they often confiscated these scraps from his pockets while frisking him in the Bastille, and the scraps can still be found in the Bastille archives – moving

examples of reportage under a regime that repressed it. These nuggets of information were so popular in Paris that people often collected them, copied them into journals or pasted them into scrapbooks. I have found hundreds of them in various archives – so many, in fact, that I think we should take the French anecdote, despite its seeming triviality, as an object worthy of serious study. By following the path of anecdotes, like particles in a blood stream, we can see how information passed from oral to written circuits of communication and eventually appeared in print. The manuscript news-sheets were often sent to printing shops outside France, joined together in chronological order, printed as books, and smuggled back into the kingdom, where they sold like hot cakes in the underground book trade. The most famous of these works, *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres en France* (*Secret Memoirs to Serve for the History of the Republic of Letters in France*), stretched to thirty-six volumes, and was described by a contemporary as “a chain of anecdotes that please everyone: the public loves to see the foolishness and the feebleness of princes” (Mercier, *Entretiens* 42).

Anecdotes therefore followed a consistent pattern of diffusion, passing through the three most important media of the time. If read carefully, the final product, the printed book, often reveals traces of the diffusion process – even in the case of the book-length biographies known as “private lives.” As an example, consider *Vie privée de Louis XV*, a very popular anonymous work first published in 1781 and reprinted at least four times before the Revolution. Seen from the outside, it looks impressive: four solid volumes, often bound in attractive calfskin, which recount the entire history of the kingdom as well as the life of the king from 1715 to 1774. When examined up close, however, it turns out to be a collage of anecdotes lifted from other works and cobbled together to form a continuous narrative. For example, a typical passage (2: 31) was quarried out of an earlier work, *Les Amours de Zeokinizul roi des Kofirans*. As Figure 5 shows, the author followed his source closely, but modified the phrasing slightly to fit into the context of the biography. A nearby page (2: 25; Figure 6) was composed by rearranging five different passages from the *Journal historique, ou fastes du règne de Louis XV*, a legal publication that provided a chronology of important royal edicts, and joining them by an occasional passage of original prose. Figure 7 shows the pattern of plagiarism across fifty pages. The horizontal bars represent pages, and the coloring on them shows what portions of their text were lifted from other works. The blank spaces indicate passages that probably were written by the author – probably, but not certainly, because I may have failed to identify all of his sources.

Moreover, just as this book was a composite of other books, so, too, did it provide fragments for still more books, notably a two-volume history of Louis XV's reign, *Les Fastes de Louis XV* (*The Annals of Louis XV*), published a year later. The anonymous author of *The Annals* extracted the juiciest passages from *The Private Life of Louis XV*, added ingredients pilfered from other books, including *The Iron-Plated Gazetteer*, spiced it up with some prose of his own, stirred well, and served it up as a new work. He hardly disguised his plagiarism, as he admitted in the preface: “Like him [the author of *The Private Life of Louis XV*, who also remained anonymous, as did all authors of scandalous works] we compile; we are privateers; and like many others, we look upon everything good as our legitimate prize” (*Fastes* xiv). As this remark indicates, pilfering was standard practice among the hack writers of Paris and London in the eighteenth century.⁵ To call it “plagiarism” hardly does justice to their way of making books – a process of quarrying fragments out of other texts and

Plagiarism: Adapting a Passage

Vie privée de Louis XV, vol. II, p. 31*Les Amours de Zeokinizul*, p. 53

The author of *Vie privée de Louis XV* followed *les Amours de Zeokinizul roi des Kofirans* closely when he lifted passages, but he modified the phrasing slightly, usually to make the text more succinct. The key to *les Amours de Zeokinizul* identi- fies the words in italics. *Suesi* meant *Jésus*, and *Liamil* meant *Mailly*.

Figure 5. Plagiarism: adapting a passage. [R. Darnton, private collection.]

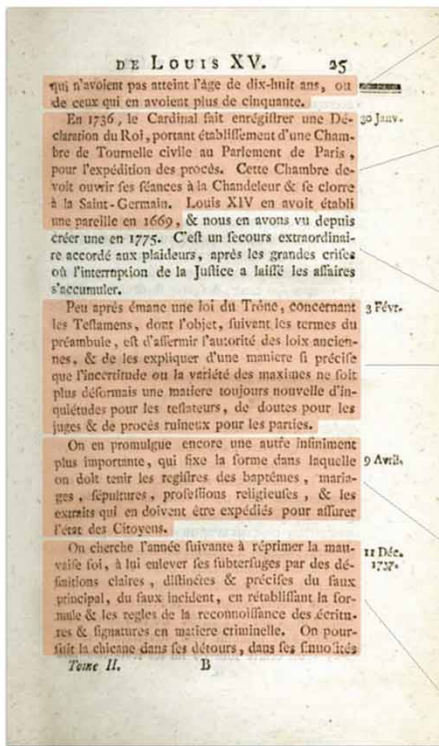
cobbling them together, or creative *bricolage*. The conventional concepts of “author” and “book” do not fit this early-modern mode of literary production.

Nor do they fit the digital future, or at least the future as it is described by the science writer Kevin Kelly: “We’ll cobble together new books from bits and pieces lifted out of old ones. Once digitized . . . books can be unraveled into single pages or be reduced further, into snippets of a page. These snippets will be remixed into reordered books.”⁶ As Lawrence Lessig of the Harvard Law School puts it, “We live in a ‘cut and paste’ culture enabled by technology” (105). He treats peer-to-peer file sharing as an example of the *bricolage* inherent in many kinds of creativity, that of Walt Disney and Bob Dylan as well as Shakespeare. Marcus Boon, a professor of English at York University, Toronto, takes the argument further in a recent book, *In Praise of Copying*. He treats fragmentation and montage as a main concern of contemporary culture, and he describes copying as “a fundamental part of being human” (7). To

Plagiarism: Cobbling Passages Together

Vie privée de Louis XV, vol. II, p. 31

Journal historique, ou fastes du règne de Louis XV



p. 141
 ... des régimens Irlandois de sa maiesté, à l'ex-
 ception de ceux qui n'ont point atteint l'âge de dix-
 huit ans, & de ceux qui en ont plus de cinquante.
 M. de la Tour, intendant de Bretagne, est nom-

p. 151
 de Biron.
 Déclaration du roi, portant établissement d'une
 chambre de tournelle civile au parlement de Paris,
 pour l'expédition des procès: cette chambre devoit
 ouvrir ses séances à la Chandeleur, & finir à la
 saint-Jean. Louis XIV en avoit établi une pareille en
 1669.
 Le duc de Lorraine fait en cérémonie, à Vienne,

original

p. 151
 quis de Biffy.
 Ordonnance du roi, concernant les testamens,
 dont l'objet, suivant les termes de cette loi, est d'af-
 fermir l'autorité des loix anciennes, & de les ex-
 pliquer d'une manière si précise, que l'incertitude ou
 la variété des maximes ne font plus désormais une
 matière toujours nouvelle d'inquiétude pour les tes-
 tateurs, de doutes pour les juges, & de procès rui-
 neux pour les parties.
 M. de Villeneuve, dont l'ambassade à la Porte a

p. 154
 ... & expédiés dans le cours de cette année.
 Ordonnance du roi, concernant la forme dans
 laquelle on doit tenir les registres de baptêmes, ma-
 riages, sépultures, professions religieuses, & les
 extraits qui en doivent être expédiés pour assurer
 l'état des citoyens.
 Mort du prince Eugène de Savoie à l'âge de 75

p. 164
 meurt à Londres âgé de cinquante-quatre ans.
 L'ordonnance du roi, concernant le faux prin-
 cipal, le faux incident, & la reconnaissance des écrit-
 tures & signatures en matière criminelle, & celle
 concernant les évocations & réglemens des juges,
 sont enregistrées au parlement. Ainsi, l'importance
 & la difficulté des négociations qui se font pour la
 paix, n'empêche point le roi d'administrer la justice
 à ses sujets, & de leur donner de sages loix, qui se-

Pages of Vie privée de Louis XV often combined paragraphs lifted from different sections of Journal historique, ou fastes du règne de Louis XV, a legal publication which provided a chronology of important royal edicts.

Figure 6. Plagiarism: cobbling passages together. [R. Darnton, private collection.]

earlier critics like Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes the fragmentary qualities of literature corresponded with modernistic ways of apprehending the world, and they had not dreamt of computer science and the Internet, which makes copy-and-paste and mix-and-mash everyday experiences for ordinary people. But judging from the rampant

Plagiarism: The General Pattern

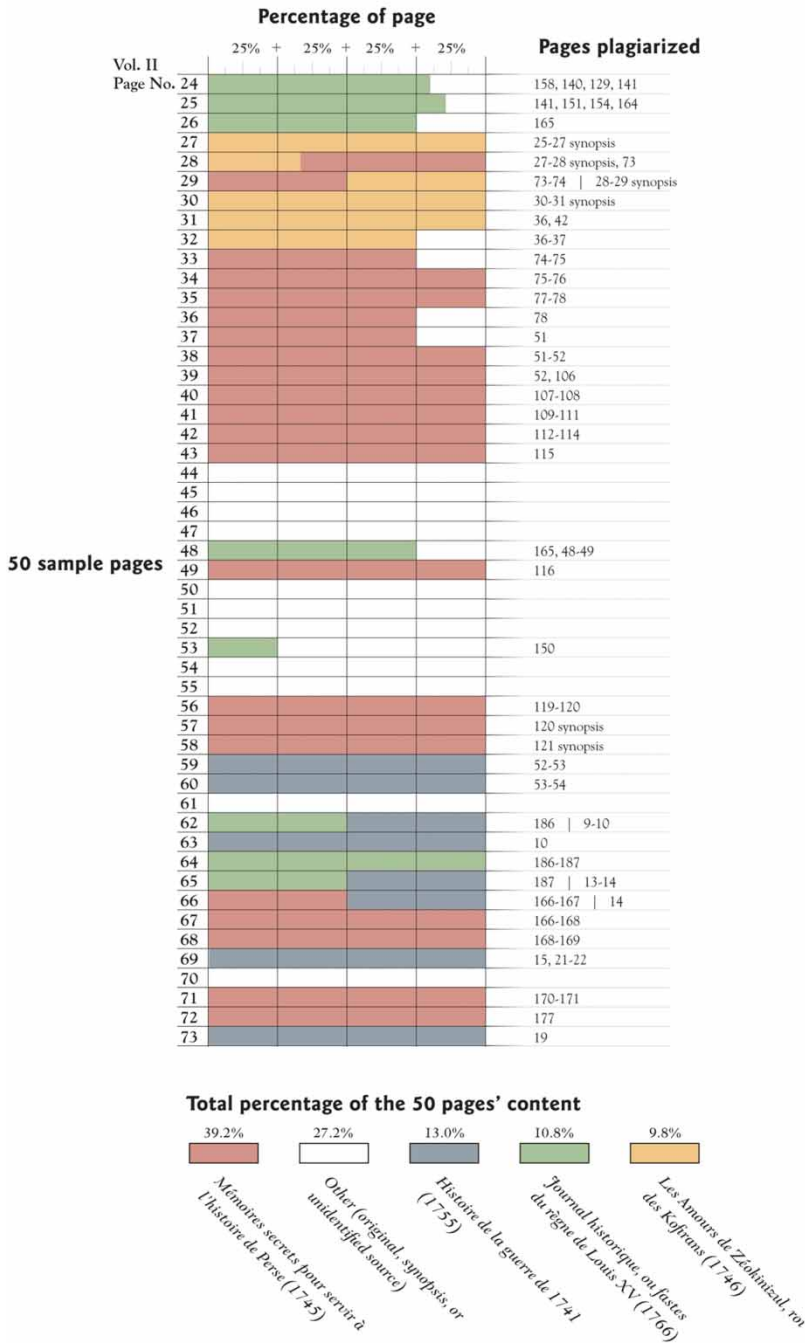


Figure 7. Plagiarism: the general pattern.

copying of the eighteenth century, we may tend to exaggerate the divide between the early-modern and the post-modern worlds.

Returning now to ways of writing under the *Ancien Régime*, I suggest that we imagine the authors of works like *The Private Life of Louis XV* sitting in a garret at a table covered with books, manuscript news-sheets, and notes scribbled on scraps of paper. Out of this heap of material, they selected bits and pieces and rearranged them to make new books. The books themselves were almost incidental, because the most important unit in this kind of literature was the fragment, the shard of information, which could be recycled indefinitely. I propose that we rethink literary history by beginning with the notion of fragmentation. I realize, of course, that this proposal pertains especially to anonymous works of a scandalous character, those built out of anecdotes. But that literature was enormous, and I have read enough of it to be convinced that systematic study would reveal how anecdotes passed through oral, written, and printed sources, gathering force and ultimately forming a kind of political folklore, which conveyed a collective sense of the nature of the French monarchy on the eve of the Revolution.

Let me cite one last example, an anecdote that profoundly marked the collective French imagination – or so I believe, although I cannot prove it. It constitutes a paragraph in *Anecdotes about Mme la comtesse du Barry*, and I will quote it in full:

We find in the manuscript journal [i.e., *the nouvelles à la main*] that often guides us in assembling the facts of our history, an anecdote relating to the period of Madame du Barry's life that we are discussing. From it one can infer what was then the general opinion of the public about her domination of the king. It appears under the date of March 20, 1773. "The talk is all about an incident that the courtiers have carefully noted and that proves that Mme la comtesse du Barry has not lost in favor or intimacy with her royal lover. His Majesty likes to brew his own coffee and by this innocent occupation to relieve himself from the heavy demands of government. Recently, when the coffee pot was on the fire and His Majesty's attention was occupied by something else, the coffee began to boil over, and the beautiful favorite cried out, 'Hey France! Look out, your coffee is bugging off [*fout le camp*].' It is said that this title of France is the familiar expression used by this lady inside the [private] *petits appartements* [of Versailles]. Such details should never be repeated outside of them, but they leak out, owing to the malignity of the courtiers." (*Anecdotes* 215)

This anecdote, which passed from gossip and manuscript bulletins to a best-selling book, made the monarchy look tawdry and ridiculous – not merely because it stressed the vulgarity of the royal mistress, who, as it emphasized, had once been a whore, but also because domestic servants were often called by the name of their home province; so by calling the king "la France," Mme du Barry was treating him as her lackey.

The coffee-spilling anecdote is one of the best-known from the Old Regime, and it is still alive in the collective memory. I found this image (Figure 8) a few years ago from a French Canadian comic book. The artist got the mistress wrong (she was not Mme de Pompadour), but he got the message absolutely right.

The message I want to convey concerns the fragmentary nature of information and the way it is reworked in communication systems. Those systems have differed enormously throughout history. So I am not claiming that eighteenth-century anecdotes and twenty-first-century blogs are the same thing. I am arguing the opposite: by noticing their similarities, we can understand their differences. They had a common property, fragmentation, but they conveyed messages by the way they figured as fragments in profoundly different information ecologies. By consulting the blogosphere, I think



Figure 8. Cartoon in a French Canadian comic book. [explicitly not copyrighted]

we can appreciate an aspect of communication history that has never been studied – in fact, never even noticed.

Notes

1. Because this essay was written as a lecture, it is somewhat informal in tone and does not have an elaborate scholarly apparatus. The 49 slides that accompanied the lecture were intended to function as part of the argument, not merely to illustrate it. But they could not be economically reproduced in this article, and therefore most of them have been eliminated. The essay extends an argument that I developed in *The Devil in the Holy Water or the Art of Slander from Louis XIV to Napoleon*: see especially chapters 21–24 for references to manuscript and printed sources. A preliminary and abbreviated version of the essay appeared in the form of a blog: “Blogging, Now and Then,” *New York Review of Books Blog*, 18 March 2010.
2. The following discussion is based in part on Sullivan, “Why I Blog”; Massing, “The News About the Internet”; Grigoriadis, “Everybody Sucks”; McGrath, “Search and Destroy”; and Gould, “Exposed.”
3. On English journalism in the eighteenth century, see Werkmeister, *The London Daily Press, 1772–1792*; Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth-Century England*; and Black, *The English Press, 1621–1861*.
4. Archenholz 42, cited in Slauter, “Le paragraphe mobile” 368. I have profited greatly from the dissertation by Will Slauter, “News and Diplomacy in the Age of the American Revolution.”

5. The officials in charge of the book trade treated this kind of plagiarism as commonplace and took no action against it, unless it involved libel or some other offense. Thus a remark about a hack writer by a censor named Rousselet in an undated letter to Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malessherbes, the Directeur de la librairie, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. fr. 22150: "L'abbé Cayer est un homme faisant métier de prendre des lambeaux de brochures ou de livres imprimés et de faire imprimer pour la province ces pillages ajustés à sa façon."
6. Kevin Kelly, "Scan This Book!" See also the related discussion of non-linear reading and writing in Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, chapter 6.

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