

Chapter I: Setting the Stage for *Grogneurs*

Media Structures and Technologies in Bénin

Research Background: Media Studies and Politics

Cotonou-Missèbo. Today, I am visiting Sébastien's small tailor workshop, named '*Soleil d'Or*' (Golden Sun), located in a neighbourhood known for its numerous stores and services related to the trades in fabric and second-hand clothing. His workshop is constructed mainly of bamboo and corrugated iron and contains three sewing machines with some chairs and tables covered with fabric, garments, and other materials. Sébastien tailors on demand for his clients with the assistance of two apprentices. A radio is playing in the background that provides music and information throughout the day. Sébastien's workshop is also the setting for his *grogne* phone calls during which he participates in interactive radio shows on current issues. He usually writes down his words before calling the respective station (2021–2025).

This vignette portrays Sébastien, the experienced *grogneur* whom I previously mentioned in the introduction to this book. He is a prime example of a frequent caller to interactive radio programmes (or call-in radio shows) in Bénin. Similar to those in other African countries, these call-in shows have flourished since the 1990s, alongside the waves of proliferation of state-independent media in many countries of the subcontinent, occasioned by political liberalisation (Frère 2016: 114.; Grätz 2012: pp. 433 et seq.) Sub-Saharan Africa saw an increasing pluralisation of media outlets (Hydén et al. 2002, M'Bayo/Onwumechili/Nwanko 2000, Nyamnjoh 2005; Njogu/Middleton 2009, Wasserman 2010), followed by the boom of the mobile phones and messenger services. These affordances have stimulated the active role of media users, especially in embracing participatory media formats on the subcontinent (Girard 2003, Banda 2010, Mutsvairo 2016a; Srinivasan/Diepeveen 2018). Triggers

have been the processes of media convergence (Willems 2010) and the digital turn in general (Moyo 2013; see also Mudhai/Tettey/Banda 2009).

Nevertheless, the debate on participatory media in Africa still oscillates between somewhat euphoric reports (Banda 2010) and more sceptical or realistic positions (Willems 2013). Especially in media development cooperation, several studies have applied an apparently normative perspective and envisioned participatory media as a straightforward element of political participation and, ultimately, the democratisation of society. Participatory media also encourage non-professional media users to regularly provide valuable information to the broader public. The overall affirmative perception of these media actors is largely associated with the aforementioned concepts of 'citizen journalism' and 'alternative journalism' (Atton/Hamilton 2015); concepts that my study aims to question (see in more detail in Chapter V, pp. 153 et seq.). However, I argue that such normative or simplified concepts allow only a limited analysis.

Moreover, my book addresses questions of media change at the interface between 'classical' (i.e. the radio) and 'new' (i.e. digital) media in Africa. My study thus analyses call-in radio shows, in an attempt to build a bridge between the now well-established field of radio studies (Fardon/Furniss 2000, Gunner/Ligaga/Moyo 2011, Grätz 2014b) and digital media: the mobile phone (Bruijn/Nyamnjoh/Brinkman 2009; Vokes 2018). My study underlines that interactive media also contribute to the increasing hybridity of media usages (Gagliardone 2016) in West Africa. Before addressing the central theme of the book and developing my arguments in detail, I briefly outline the emergence of radio broadcasting in the Republic of Bénin.

A Brief History of Radio Broadcasting in Bénin

With an area of 114,763 km², the former French colony of Dahomey (until 1975), now the *République du Bénin*, is a state in West Africa located between Nigeria and Togo. It has an official population of 14.6 million, characterised by ethnic and linguistic pluralism and a literacy rate of 51.4% (CIA 2025). The official language is French, the predominant *linguae francae* are Fongbé and Yoruba (with variants) in the southern part and Dendi in the north.

Bénin gained independence in August 1960. The civilian governments were followed by a military regime, with a socialist period until 1989 under the leadership of Mathieu Kérékou. However, economic crises and protest movements

led to political changes, which were initiated by a national conference in 1990. This transition paved the way for a more democratic constitution and a multi-party presidential system (Kohnert/Preuß 1992:6, Bierschenk 1995, Bako-Arifari 1995).

After the presidency of Mathieu Kérékou (1996–2006) followed by Thomas Boni Yayi (2006–2016), Patrice Talon, a business tycoon, was elected (Erlecke 2016) and re-elected in 2021 (under problematic circumstances, see Gänsler 2021). Talon will hold the presidency until April 2026, when the next presidential election is scheduled. Although the Republic of Bénin has been known in West Africa for its democratic opening and active civil society since 1990, it is now characterised by elements of autocratic governance (Kohnert/Preuß 2019; Duerksen 2019, 2021; Koter 2024), or, as some observers put it, a ‘wardship pluralism’ (*pluralisme sous tutelle*; Dione 2025). A coup attempt failed on December 7, 2025.

Talon launched an ambitious reform programme to modernise the country’s infrastructure, including the construction of modern markets, avenues, and tourist attractions while reorganising the education and legal sectors. He further propelled crucial economic sectors, which also motivated foreign investments (Stroh 2019; Lawson 2015). However, his policies were met with opposition from those who lost the elections, as well as NGOs and parts of the media, which accused him of authoritarian tendencies, Machiavellianism, and a lack of respect for the country’s political forces¹.

The most problematic event was the parliamentary elections in April 2019. A new electoral law introduced more rigid conditions for candidates and parties². This law also obliged all political parties to adhere to either one of the main political blocs (i.e. today’s *Bloc Républicain*, *Union Progressiste*, or *Les*

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- 1 Various political commentators have compared Patrice Talon’s governance with similar semi-autocratic presidents such as Paul Kagame in Rwanda, who have sought to reform and modernise their countries quickly in an authoritarian manner, see Gänsler (2019a).
 - 2 Loi n° 2018–31 du 03–09-2018 portant code électoral en République du Bénin. Until 2019, political parties were by and large enterprises of individual politicians based on regional affinities and clientelist networks, see Engels (2005) and Stroh (2014). Consequently, their number grew steadily, which opened up a constant game of changing alliances and electoral bets. Thus, the reform was initially welcomed by most voters. However, it required the acquisition of signatures from previously elected politicians and high bails for potential candidates for both the presidential and parliamentary elections. Electoral campaigns have continued to be expensive, so they have favoured wealthy participants, a trend that is prevalent throughout the region, see Koter (2017).

Démocrates), with the first two serving as advocates of the president's policies (*mouvance*). Intended to end the all-too-large spectre of political parties with numerous small parties, the law resulted in much controversy (Preuß 2019).

After the elections, violent protests broke out in Cotonou, Porto-Novo, and Tchaourou (Koter 2024). These protests, which were severely repressed by the security forces, led to several deaths and injuries (Gänsler 2019b) and, subsequently, a general crisis in the country. A conference that brought together most of the political parties proposed changes to the electoral law. Tensions eased somewhat after the legislative elections in January 2023, when *Les Démocrates*, an oppositional party in the true sense of the word, was accepted and won several seats (Laplace 2023). However, the majority of parliament mainly consisted of politicians who supported the government. Furthermore, formerly critical elites were either tacit, had been co-opted, or colluded with the presidential camp (Koter op.cit.). Important positions within the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Media Authority were filled with individuals close to the president, which allowed laws to be constantly tailored for stricter political control. Governance under Talon has nevertheless provoked controversy concerning issues such as the harsh evictions of informal settlers and the juridical persecution of oppositional politicians (Gänsler 2021) by the specialised court CRIET (*Cour de Répression des Infractions Économiques et du Terrorisme*).

Media in Bénin between Censorship and Instrumentalisation

When assessing the media system, radio remains the primary electronic mass medium in Bénin in terms of both the number of listeners and radio stations (Grätz 2014b, Assogba 2008). Although television has become increasingly significant, with terrestrial, satellite, and numerous internet channels available, 102 radio stations operate in various languages throughout the country (HAAC 2025), especially in principal urban areas such as Cotonou and Parakou.

In major cities, listeners can choose from a variety of stations. The national broadcaster provides programmes in 18 national languages and in French. Radio's prominent role in Bénin is, however, a more recent development. The first national radio service in the former colony of Dahomey, Radio Cotonou, began broadcasting in 1953. However, the state broadcaster in the (then-) Republic of Bénin took full swing in the 1970s, with the creation of

new broadcasting houses and radio programmes for listeners in rural areas (Saxer/Grossenbacher 1987).

Public mass media remained completely controlled by the central state, especially during the socialist period between 1972 and 1989. However, after the political changes in 1990, a new constitution allowed a greater freedom of expression. As a result, many independent newspapers emerged (Frère 2000; Campbell 1998; Adélakoun 2008; Frère 1996; Adjovi 2023).

In 1995, the first community radio stations were installed (Grätz 2010; Da Matha 1995; Edah 2002; Grätz 2003; 2009; Mamadou 2008; N'Tcha 2008). New media laws in 1997³ then enabled the establishment of state-independent radio and TV stations (ODEM 2001). Since then, there have been several waves of licensing of broadcasters by the Supreme Media Authority HAAC (*Haute Autorité de l'Audiovisuel et de la Communication*)⁴. Among them are private⁵, religious, associative and community radio stations⁶. These stations usually offer a wide range of programmes, which provide information, entertainment, advice and news.

Interactive (call-in) shows, further driven by the mobile phone boom since 2000, are particularly popular with listeners, as are press reviews, quiz shows, and political debates. Media conversion enables the broader dissemination of information and often leads to cultural revival (Loubegnon 2023). The media field in Bénin also encompasses a vibrant film industry and numerous production companies. Some private media houses comprise several media, including (web-) TV and radio stations. These enable synergies and a larger investment in media infrastructure, as well as greater professionalism. Nevertheless, the editorial line of various private media is not independent of those who sponsor its existence (e.g. politicians and businesspeople).

Furthermore, the once-flourishing newspaper landscape (Frère 2000) has shrunk considerably, mainly due to an increasing shift towards purely online publications and online advertisements. Previous state subventions have been suspended. A few journals still uphold the standard of quality journalism (e.g.

3 Law 97–010 of August 20, 1997 on the liberalisation of the media.

4 For the institutional framework of broadcasting in the Republic of Bénin cf. Adjovi (2001); (2003), Bardelli-Danieli (2001), La Brosse/Frère (2012), Grätz (2010), Carlos and Djogbénou (2005) and Assogba (2008).

5 Most private stations generate their budgets from advertisements, see Grätz (2013).

6 Since 2000, most community and associative radio stations have joined together in the FERCAB (Fédération des Radios Communautaires et Assimilées).

Le Potentiel and *La Nouvelle Tribune*) and complement the comprehensive online news platform *Banouto*.

Despite the plurality of the media system in Bénin, the bold development of media and journalism there is still hampered by economic constraints (Guèdègbé 2020), direct and indirect forms of censorship (Grätz 2015a, *Reporters sans frontières* 2022), and governmental control (Friedrich- Ebert-Stiftung 2022). Censorship in Bénin encompasses a wide range of interventions and measures designed to shape the activities of journalists, including more direct interventions (e.g. lawsuits against media outlets and journalists) and indirect strategies (e.g. intimidating phone calls and bribing critical journalists to tame their output). In this regard, the country has seen both indirect control or soft censorship (Podesta 2009), already starting between 2006 and 2016 under President Boni (Grätz 2015a), and judicial censorship.

The role of the Supreme Media Authority, HAAC (Adjovi 2003a), is indeed ambiguous. While it helps raise the standards of media production and provides a necessary watchdog position to indict any apparent abuses of the media, it does not apply the same standards since it favours governmental media, above all, the TV department of the state media house, SRTB. Moreover, many of its decisions are disproportionate, such as the suspension of entire media companies (Koter 2024:217), which happened in 2018, when the critical private daily newspaper *La Nouvelle Tribune* was temporarily banned (*Reporters sans frontières* 2018; BBC 2018b), and in August 2023, when the same measure was imposed on the media house *La Gazette du Golfe*, which is still suspended (Gnan-sounou/Édouard 2023; Tchobo 2023)⁷.

Furthermore, as early as 2019, the licence of Radio Soleil FM, a major opposition and news-oriented radio station, was revoked on a formal pretext (Radio France International 2019).

The HAAC monitors all licensed media outlets, whereas individual faults (e.g. defamation on social networks) are directly sanctioned by the special court CRIET. Even for minor offences, journalists have been sentenced to prison (e.g. Ignace Sossou in 2020, *Le Monde avec AFP* 2020) or have been required to pay substantial fines (e.g. Virgile Ahouansé in 2023, Houndjo 2023). Especially the internet law (*code du numérique*), firstly issued in 2017, provides

7 The reason for this act was apparently an editorial that commented positively on the coup d'état in Niger at the end of July 2023, which the government condemned. The HAAC suspended the entire media house and ordered the freezing of all bank accounts, olofofo (2023).

for harsh penalties sanctioning alleged offences (Guézodjè 2020). For instance, a critical blogger recently received a two-year imprisonment sentence by the CRIET (RFI 2025; US Department of State 2025). The current HAAC administration also widely utilises formal bureaucracy, with the argument to ‘clean up’ the media field. In this vein, the exclusion of journalists or outlets is most often related to the required renewal of press cards, or contracts for exploiting frequencies and printing newspapers, as well as for websites, WebTV, and news portals, which may be hampered at this moment.

However, at the end of February 2023, several new stations began broadcasting, including Radio Cotonou, a non-profit station run by the municipal administration of that town, and BIP Radio, a private broadcaster founded by the experienced journalist Jean-Luc Aplogan. Radio Cotonou focusses on proximity to its listeners and proposes many everyday companion programmes, while BIP Radio is largely conceptualised as a 24-hour news and information-oriented station (advertising slogan: *La première chaîne d'information en continue au Bénin*). In both cases, great care is taken to avoid the mistakes of other stations. With a solid source of funding, these stations aim to be independent of the central government.

From their onset, both stations produced various call-in programmes, including those of the *grogne* type, which are hosted by experienced journalists. These are, in Cotonou, Benjamin Honoré Nahum (Radio Cotonou) and Rachida Houssou (BIP Radio), as well as Firmin Kassaga (Peace FM) and Philibert Abibou (Radio CAPP FM). Their stations compete for listeners while trying to sharpen their respective profiles. For example, BIP Radio offers many background reports, including those on foreign policy issues, while Radio Cotonou provides its listeners with call-in programmes on family issues every morning.

Few truly independent stations, such as Radio CAPP FM and BIP Radio, or the web-based broadcaster Crystal News⁸ in Porto-Novo, operate within the narrow limits of legitimate criticism. Consequently, Bénin has effectively fallen to 92nd place on the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters without borders 2025). Most journalists still strive to acquire greater professionalism by minimising incorrect or commissioned information. In this respect, the journalists' association UPMB (*Union des Professionnelles des Médias du Bénin*) offers training sessions and advice.

8 Crystal News, founded by journalist Virgile Ahouansé (formerly at Radio Soleil). Currently suspended for formal reasons (10/2025).

Rounding out the picture are three current (2025) large mobile phone companies (i.e. MTN, Moov, and CELTIS), some of which have international shareholders⁹. The telecommunications authority ARCEP (*Autorité de Régulation des Communications Électroniques et de la Poste*) monitors this sector. The dominant messenger service is WhatsApp, which is widely used in the country, along with social networks such as Facebook and Instagram.

Investigating Participatory Media in Bénin

Let us return to the introduction of this book to remind ourselves of its main purpose. I aim to focus on interactive radio shows and discuss the role of the main actors involved, especially the frequent callers to these shows in Bénin, known as *grogneurs*. What are their practices and interactions with other media actors, such as journalists and the general public? How can we determine their position within new information circuits in the country, which are shaped by the proliferation of digital media?

To answer these questions, I conducted field research in Bénin, mainly using qualitative methods (Pype/Jedlowski 2019). My intermittent fieldwork in Bénin spanned over a period of six years. Due to personal constraints, I had to divide my research into various shorter field stays mainly between 2018 and 2025 (22 months in total), which allowed me to follow several *grogneurs* and their activities over a longer time span.

Thus, most insights were derived from numerous formal and informal encounters with listeners, journalists, media experts, and media authorities on various occasions. It is impossible to list them all¹⁰. Informal talks are often

9 In 2025, there were 4.71 million internet users, and online penetration stood at 32.2%. Mobile connections raised up to 16.7 million; equivalent to 114% of the total population (when totalling all kinds of related services) Bénin had 2.40 million social media user identities, which is 16.4 percent of the total population; as of August 2025, see Kemp (2025). A total of 25.3% on average of all households had a TV, with 46% in the southern Atlantic department against 21% in the northern Atakora department; as of 2016, see Smits (2016). I could not find any recent data about the number of radio sets.

10 Interview data and memos from observations are filed in my personal archives. References to these (i.e. 'personal information') indicate the name, month, year, and place. All translations from local French (or from intermediary translations in local Fongbé or Dendi, with the help of local friends) are mine, when not differently referenced. AI was used to correct my English grammar.

less structured than formal interviews, but they are most often a cornerstone of qualitative fieldwork, as documented in my notebooks.

Based on semi-open questionnaires, I had the opportunity to talk to *grogneurs* of various categories (a total of 60 and in diverse locations: 15 in Natitingou, 15 in Parakou, and 30 in the Cotonou area). In most cases, the *grogneurs* readily gave me the phone numbers of fellow *grogneurs* to contact them for further interviews. I mostly worked in French, but I also conducted eight interviews in Fongbé and Dendi (or bilingually), assisted by local helpers and friends as translators. This approach could have limited the scope of my study, but it was consistent with the language of the majority of the *grogne* shows.

Furthermore, I interviewed journalists who hosted interactive radio shows (20 in Cotonou, eight in Parakou, and five in Natitingou), as well as frequent listeners to these shows (70) at various places (20 in Natitingou, 20 in Parakou, and, above all, 30 in the Cotonou area). This tableau of formal interviews was complemented by expert interviews with representatives of journalist associations in Bénin (five), media experts and scientists (eight), as well as governmental authorities (10). Here, I also integrated quantitative elements (concerning the central features of the *grogneurs*). The main findings are expressed as tendencies, as exact numbers may create a false impression of precision.

Finally, seven larger group discussions were held, three in Cotonou with *grogneurs* and journalists, and one in Parakou, as well as three in Natitingou with members of listeners' clubs where *grogneurs* dominate. Interviews with 'regular' listeners aimed at evaluating their habits of radio listening, their appreciation of *grogne* shows, and the *grogneurs* in particular. Moreover, observations were made at various radio stations during the production of these programmes or during editorial meetings. In some cases, I was invited to be a studio guest and participate in call-in shows (mainly *Tribune libre*, Radio CAPP FM, Cotonou, and *L'invité de la semaine*, Radio Nanto, Natitingou), which helped to augment a certain confidence among the *grogneurs* when later encountering them during individual discussions.

The major sites of my fieldwork represent a larger, densely populated metropolitan area in the south, a mid-sized regional administrative and economic centre in the north, and a provincial town that profits from tourism and trade as it expands into a mid-sized town. The first and far more important region of my study spans from Cotonou to the neighbouring areas, where numerous radio stations, including the national broadcaster and the

mentioned private stations, operate, thus encompassing Porto-Novo, Godomey, and Abomey-Calavi.

Parakou, the third-largest city in Bénin, is primarily a trading centre, as well as an important administrative centre. Here, listeners tune into the national broadcaster, Radio Bénin, and its regional affiliate, Radio Parakou, as well as several private stations with large audiences (see below) or community stations, such as Deeman FM. One popular station is Radio Arzèkè, which takes its name from the city's large central market. At the same time, Radio Fraternité (*Groupe de Presse Fraternité*) and Urban FM (*Groupe de Presse le Matinal*) are regional outlets of larger media houses.

Radio Arzèkè FM, broadcasting in French and national languages, was established as a private radio station; however, it operates closely with local populations, particularly in the central neighbourhoods of Parakou. Despite its limited technical equipment, Radio Arzèkè FM is marked by credible audiences and experienced journalists who produce critical news and development-oriented programmes (Assoc ONG/Gispert 2016).

In Natitingou, a municipality in northwestern Bénin, an administrative and market centre and tourist hotspot of the country near the Atakora Mountains, listeners can listen to the local Radio Nanto, a community radio station. In that area, superregional broadcasters, such as RFI, Radio Parakou and Radio Kara (Northern Togo), also reach out.

Often, I have taken the time to visit frequent callers in their communities to better understand the salience of their worries. For example, I visited a *grogneur*, Valentin Ayonou, in his neighbourhood Tchònvì on the shores of Lake Nokoué, where I witnessed problematic sewage and road construction in an area prone to recurring flooding (Tchònvì, 7.4.2023). Similarly, I accompanied *grogneur* Vierin Hounigbo to visit the primary school in his home village of Fonkounmè, a school lacking closure, despite being menaced by repeated thefts (Fonkounmè, 28.03.2024).

Furthermore, I conducted content analysis, including off-site methods of research (i.e. analysing recordings and internet livestreams of interactive shows)¹¹. In general, social media helped me establish and sustain many contacts, as most *grogneurs* and journalists use it. I was also accepted to join discussion groups (on WhatsApp), mainly comprised of listeners' clubs,

11 All audio files and transcripts I analysed stemmed from my personal recordings and archives. I usually specify the day, programme, and channel. Since podcast offerings usually disappear after some time, I did not provide the URL.

and I followed discussion threads on Facebook pages¹². Some *grogneurs* and journalists were particularly helpful in exchanging relevant information, transferring recorded interventions and whole *grogne* shows, documents, as well as information on current events.

Finally, the introduction of livestreaming by increasing radio stations has enabled me to listen from Germany and to record broadcasts whenever possible. However, I propose not discussing all methodological issues in detail here. Throughout the book, various ethnographic samples (e.g. transcripts of observations and conversations) are used to illustrate my findings and contextualise them. Thereby, these elements may better convey the fieldwork process.

At this point, I want to insert some preliminary remarks about certain 'sensitive issues' in my research: the veracity of the *grogneurs*' statements, as well as aspects of their motifs. Portraying individual *grogneurs* and their comments during phone calls to radio stations, based on samples and case studies, was part of a general endeavour to understand the pertinence of these interactive programmes and the position of their main actors in general. Consequently, this book is not intended to be an investigative report.

All *grogneurs* operate in an extensive continuum of truly diverse motives and practices (see Chapters III and V). Therefore, I report on their attitudes, including those of a few individuals who, for whatever reason, do not enjoy a good reputation. However, I refrain from any bare assumptions of probable 'hidden' intentions, which are beyond the central aims and scope of my work. Moreover, I am not in a position to prove whether every statement is ultimately true or false, nor can I really verify instances of manipulability of individual *grogneurs* (see Otchoun 2005). I include such information in a broader evaluation of the public position of *grogneurs* in Bénin today and the general social meaning of their statements.

The vast majority of *grogneurs* I have met have started to call in to radio shows out of a passion, a strong desire to contribute to public debates, and the aim of investing their personalities. Given that the freedom of expression is currently at stake in Bénin, verbal pressure may also affect media activists who are consequently frightened. All these problematic issues are part of a shifting field of political positioning that defines the interactions between all media actors in Bénin today.

12 Today, most FM broadcasters provide livestreams via an integrated media player on a website or apps such as ZENO, and recordings of selected shows on platforms such as YouTube, SoundCloud, and Facebook.

To this point, I outlined the general situation of the media in the Republic of Bénin and the history of radio broadcasting in the country. Hence, let us return to the evolution of these *grogne* radio programmes within the Béninese media context from the outset. In the following chapter, I describe the background and development of this radio genre in Bénin, its current form, and the primary debates and conflicts surrounding its success in the country.

Figure 4: Tranquilin Wantori, journalist at Radio Nanto, Natitingou, August 2025.



Source: Author