

Introduction

The Central Idea of the Book: Investigating New Media Actors

[Caller:] ‘*Bonjour, Monsieur le Journaliste*, this is Hermann Méton from Vêdoko!’ [Alassane Sanni, Host:] ‘*Bonjour!*’ [Caller:] ‘Yesterday, around 12, I saw people from the national police on a control mission in downtown Cotonou, but it seems that they had stopped various motorcyclists with a pretext, without a reason. They took money from them, certainly without paying it into the state coffers. This kind of action should be sanctioned!’ [Host:] ‘You have exceeded your time on air!’ ‘Ok, goodbye’ (Rec. from Golfe FM, *La grogne matinal*, 6.3.2018, 6:35 am).¹

This extract is from a phone call to a private radio station in Cotonou, the largest city in the Republic of Bénin. This call was part of an extraordinarily successful programme, which has been aired for a long time every morning by Golfe FM at 6:30 am. It is called *La grogne matinal* (‘Morning anger’). Callers² may complain about current problems in public life and about any bad experiences they have had with municipal services. They may also voice critical comments about the radio programme. Usually, callers have about 90 seconds to make their statements. This strict timeframe is intended to allow many other callers to chime in.

La grogne matinal is quite an illustrious show (*émission phare*), which numerous radio listeners tune into (i.e. frequent and occasional listeners), ‘ordinary’ citizens and politicians alike, as well as administrative authorities. At times, it has even been banned by media authorities due to its potential for abuse. While

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- 1 All translations from French are mine.
 - 2 My analysis applies to all genders, unless declared otherwise. For the role of female frequent callers, the *grogneuses*, see Chapter III, p.83.

it has often been suspended during presidential and parliamentary elections, it has continued to exist.

Today, this broadcast format, ubiquitous throughout Bénin, has been adopted by almost all radio stations in the country under various titles. The programmes appeal to their audiences due to their originality and because they mediate between different communication styles and media actors in various locations. Thus, they connect listeners and radio producers in new ways.

The most fascinating aspect for me that sparked this research was the fact that almost 80% of all callers to such programmes are actually comprised of the same people. These people call radio stations almost daily, often several times a day. Most of them criticise defunct infrastructures and incompetent administrations. However, they also often denounce problems in political life, including corruption (Aihou 2001). In most cases, these callers are well known to journalists, politicians, and the general public in Bénin while maintaining close contact with each other.

Throughout the country, these callers are commonly known as *grogneurs*, deriving their appellation from the name of the above-mentioned and most famous interactive radio show *La grogne matinal* (Grätz 2024). This book uses both 'frequent callers' and '*grogneurs*,' yet the latter is more widespread and specific to the Bénin case. Another frequent moniker is *faiseurs d'opinion* (opinion-makers)³. Thus, this book focuses on the media practices (Bräuchler and Postill 2010; Helle-Vale 2016) of *grogneurs* and their effect on the public sphere(s) in Bénin at large.

What are the reasons for the dominance and success of these *grogneurs*? What are their motives, and what distinguishes them from other listeners and callers to radio stations? To what extent do their interventions shape the media landscape in Bénin today? Given their specific activist role and their preference for public affairs and political issues, can they be labelled 'citizen journalists' (Blaagaard 2018; Campbell 2015; Ajao 2021; Ogola/Owuor 2016; Banda 2010; Bruijn 2016; Bruijn et al. 2025)? To answer these questions, I aim to examine how frequent callers, the *grogneurs*, co-produce and influence these interactive radio shows and discuss their position in public life.

The call-in shows addressing social issues, specifically the '*grogne* shows', certainly represent a participatory media format (Carpentier 2011). 'Participatory' refers to the ways in which audiences are involved in the co-production

3 Another name is "lanceurs d'alerte" (whistleblowers).

of media formats, which has taken on new meaning in studies on social media (Jenkins 2006) and the use of mobile communication technologies in sub-Saharan Africa (Mutsivairo 2016a; Matsilele /Mpofu/Moyo 2023). However, Carpentier opposes an overly broad use of the term media participation and distinguishes between access- and content-related (or ‘minimalist’) media participation typical of interactive programmes, and structural (or ‘maximalist’) media participation, such as the co-management of media institutions and decision-making processes (op.cit. 69). He further differentiates between various modes of media access, interaction, and participation (2015). I take stock of his groundbreaking work, including his caution against the overgeneralisation of the term, and ask about the dimensions of media participation for such active listeners, as well as its limits, both in terms of content production and unequal power relations between them and journalists.

To address these questions, I tried to explore the broader context of these call-in shows⁴. I analysed in depth several such participatory programmes on different radio stations by exploring their daily production within several stations and evaluated the positions of *grogneurs*, journalists, and regular listeners. The study mainly covered three regions of Bénin, the wider Cotonou area (Cotonou with 679,012 inhabitants and neighbouring Abomey-Calavi with 656,358), the northern metropolitan area of Parakou (255,478) and the northwestern regional centre Natitingou (103,843 inhabitants; all numbers are from the official census of 2013; INSTaD 2016), where I conducted intensive fieldwork to explore the motivations, and strategies of the key groups involved. I was interested in the relationships between frequent callers while also drawing attention to the often ambivalent relationships between the *grogneurs* and journalists, as well as the former’s relationships with public authorities.

Therefore, in this book, I argue that the success of the *grogne* shows is primarily due to the dramatised interplay between radio producers and frequent listeners: their ideas, motives, and skills in enlivening that talk radio programme. The *grogneurs* are important media activists in Bénin, as they are part of a broad movement committed to veracity and the transparency of public affairs. They are masters of attention management, so they are ultimately key information brokers – intermediaries operating in diverse, interconnected contemporary public spheres.

4 Research was supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG), grant GR-1724/12-1.

Structure of the Book

The book has a central cornerstone: the views of one outstanding *grogneur*, Sébastien Gnonhossou. These ideas are based on our numerous encounters and interviews over the last few years. Sébastien is one of the most active and inspiring voices in southern Bénin. He can also be seen as emblematic of a typical frequent caller who is deeply embedded in networks of information, social engagement, and adaptive strategies of communication both on and off the air. I met Sébastien for the first time in 2018. I visited him every day since then, whenever I came to Cotonou. Sometimes, I spent several days in his workshop in Missèbo. In addition, I heard his voice at home in Germany while listening to internet radio streams. We also exchanged numerous messages via messenger services. Sébastien Gnonhossou is one of the most prominent *grogneurs* in Bénin. His voice can be heard daily on at least one of the *grogne*-style shows, such as those broadcast by radio stations CAPP FM, Peace FM, and Radio Cotonou. He is a tailor. His workshop in the Missèbo district of Cotonou is a place of social exchange, where he meets customers, other *grogneurs* visit him, and where he gathers information. Sébastien's statements largely reflect observations about daily life in this neighbourhood and in Cotonou in general. Sébastien is interested in improving the living conditions in his community and beyond. He is often one of the first to open the call-in shows with his mostly clear but passionate phone calls.

Nevertheless, Sébastien is unafraid to frankly address sensitive topics. He regularly calls into the programmes of the state broadcaster Radio Bénin (a department of the state media house *Société de Radio et Télévision du Bénin* [SRTB, formerly ORTB], restructured in 2023; Degbetchi 2023) and often refers to corruption issues as well. Known for his quick wit, Sébastien⁵ is often invited to several radio stations as a guest to discuss politics or just to appear on more entertainment-oriented shows.

Together with some fellow *grogneurs*, Sébastien founded an NGO called *Amour Pour ma Patrie*. Its members mainly want to launch information campaigns for villagers using various means of communication. The association has an additional task, namely identifying problems such as non-operational infrastructures, which the members subsequently convert into *grogne* calls.

5 Personal names are used only if they were intentionally used in public (e.g. on call-in shows). Otherwise, I anonymised them. Spelling errors due to a single acoustic template are my responsibility.

Sébastien commutes between his home in Cotonou-Akpakpa, near the central slaughterhouse, and downtown Cotonou-Missèbo, where his workshop is located. Small vignettes of our pleasant encounters serve as a primer to several chapters of this book.

In addition to this introduction and the conclusion, the book is comprised of six main chapters. The first chapter, 'Setting the Stage for *Grogneurs*: Media Structures and Technologies in Bénin', examines the history, political culture, and structural and infrastructural conditions of radio broadcasting in the Republic of Bénin. In this respect, I argue that, unlike the economic giant and neighbour Nigeria, where TV and social media are much more advanced and numerous bloggers, vloggers, and influencers dominate the media, radio still holds its central role in Bénin. Its importance is further enhanced by the availability of mobile phones and the ensuing communication affordances, including interactive call-in radio shows.

In Chapter II, '*La Grogne Matinale*: The Establishment of a Contentious Radio Show', I investigate the background of interactive radio programmes in the context of recent developments in the field of radio broadcasting. I trace the initial development of *grogne* shows from the beginning and their establishment despite critical voices over the last 20 years. I describe different types of interactive radio programmes and their production before focusing on the main issues and debates triggered by and set on the public agenda by frequent callers.

The third chapter, '*Grogne Shows*: Main Actors and Practices', mainly centres on the principal protagonists of these shows: *grogneurs* and journalists. Herein, I develop a categorisation of *grogneurs* with ideal types, based on individual biographies and 'careers'. I highlight the considerable diversity of motives, practices, and interests that characterise them. The chapter also portrays frequent female callers.

The fourth chapter, '*On Air Performances*', examines how these interactive shows are set up, presented, and organised in detail. I argue that their success is related to their clearly established structure, which is known to most listeners and goes hand in hand with elaborate rules of communication, rhetoric, and the treatment of politically sensitive issues. This combination creates a kind of 'brand' that is necessary to preserve the place of such shows and the *grogneurs* in the changing economics of public attention.

In Chapter V, '*Grogneurs* in Changing Media Environments', I explore further explanations for the success of this genre and its main protagonists in other regions of the country. I analyse the *grogneurs*' modes of information pro-

curement and their use of social media. Subsequently, I focus on their networking strategies, their relations to journalists and the wider public, including fellow listeners and authorities, and their public position in Bénin today.

The sixth chapter, 'Intermediations', examines the roles of *grogneurs* in the context of current theoretical debates, specifically those concerning citizen journalism and participatory media in sub-Saharan Africa. Here, I argue that the roles of journalists and *grogneurs* rarely overlap, as all these actors tend to maintain the boundaries of their respective positions. Thus, the *grogneurs* should be viewed as 'information brokers' to highlight their mediating and pivotal role in the circuits of public communication. Thus, I advocate for a broader analysis, even beyond the discussion of media activists as agents of democratisation.

In Chapter VII, 'Conclusion', I summarise the main points of my book while outlining future research approaches, particularly regarding new technological developments.

My account of the role of *grogneurs*, journalists, and regular listeners is based on long-term field research and primarily qualitative methodological approaches. This study included numerous interviews with frequent callers, journalists, and media professionals (see in detail pp. 28 et seq.). In addition, I observed the *grogneurs* in their workplaces, homes, at radio stations (in the production studios and newsrooms), and at markets and other public places where people often listen to interactive radio shows. I also participated in meetings between journalists and *grogneurs*, and held various informal conversations at meeting points. Some took place at the once-famous stand *Kiosque de la morgue* (demolished in August 2025 due to road construction), a plenteous newspaper stall near the Central Hospital in Cotonou, a bar in the former Cinema Concorde, and other locations.

The book places great emphasis on content analysis, which was facilitated by the availability of livestream options, podcasts, and direct recordings on FM, as well as audio files obtained from radio stations or from *grogneurs* and their social media forums. Of course, various changes may have occurred between the completion of my on-site data collection in mid-2025 and the final publication of this book in terms of the media practises of radio stations (e.g. broadcasting schedules with interactive shows and livestream offers) and institutional developments (e.g. the suspension of radio stations), as well as by the conditions of individual interviewees. I intend to gradually publish these changes on my website.

What are the main theoretical and political contexts of my analysis of these *grogne* broadcasts?

Figure 3: Justin Sowadan, shop keeper and grogneur, Natitingou, July 2023.



Source: Author